The Witches

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THE PRISONER

James Darke

A Sphere adult series

'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.'

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Bathsheba Connell had no lock on the rickety door of her hut near the woods. With no possessions there was little point in guarding against a thief. But the men who came for her still kicked the door down. Bursting in and dragging the old woman from her bed, out into the frozen track.

'There's her cat. Look.'

'It's her devil's pet. Kill it.'

So they took the woman. Hustled her to where the Squire and Parson Frewin waited. Throwing her into the chill lock-up to wait for the Witchfinder-General . . .

Also by James Darke in Sphere Books:

THE WITCHES 2: THE TRIAL
THE WITCHES 3: THE TORTURE

The Witches: Book 1
The Prisoner

JAMES DARKE

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This is for the memory of Mike Dempsey.
In a world that grows increasingly grey and dull a bright and reckless light has been extinguished.

'One of the darker pages in our nation's chequered history is in the middle part of the seventeenth century when hundreds of innocent folk were hounded to their miserable and tortured ends by the arts of that most evil breed of men, the witchfinders. Men such as Matthew Hopkins and Robert Monk deserve only the eternal flames of Hell for their wicked works.'

From: 'The True Facts In The Matter Of The Persecution Of Witchcraft And Daemonologie' by Father Damien Murray, Published by The Circle Press of Bloomsbury, 1828.

'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.' Exodus, Chapter 21, Verse 18.

CHAPTER ONE

A thread of bright blood trickled across the woman's naked body.

Outside the grey, damp, glistening walls of the dungeon it was bitterly cold. January the twentieth, in the year of Our Lord, sixteen hundred and forty-five. The eve of the day of the Blessed Saint Agnes. Though the time was barely three in the afternoon the bleak land beyond the low barred window was shading into darkness, a rising moon reflected in the steely puddles of ice-slick water in the rutted lane outside.

'God's wounds, but this cold bites through to the very marrow of my bones!'

The speaker was a middle-aged man in a buff jerkin laced tight against the winter. His face was marked with the scars of the pox and there was a running sore at the corner of his lips.

He rested his forehead against the cold iron of the window and looked out over the Suffolk fields and marshes. Through broken gaps in the blackthorn hedge on the further side of the lane he watched a hare run, trembling through the grass, leaving a faint track in the frost.

'Come, John Stearne, and aid me in this questioning. Or has the ale fuddled your pate?'

The other man in the chamber would not have seemed out of place in a court of law. He was small built, of a neat appearance. A narrow intelligent face, the eyebrows slanting upwards giving him a permanently surprised expression. His beard was trimmed to a point, speckled with grey.

'Aye Matthew. You know me well enough and you know well enough that a quart of ale bothers me less than an ounce of feathers to a packhorse.'

He tossed the words over his broad shoulders, eyes following a barn owl, setting off on its night's hunting, swooping low over the lych-gate to the flint church of Stanston. It seemed to him that for all of its feathers the bird was a'cold.

'John Stearne!' The voice was sharper and he turned round to face his employer.

'Well enough, Matthew. The wench will not be running far from us.'

'More wood on the fire, man, and make haste to it. I swear that this chill will tear the flesh from my bones. I have never known such a cold.'

The dungeon was some fifteen paces in breadth and nineteen in length. It lay beneath the tithe barn of Stanston, accessible by a spiral staircase of nine steps. The barn stood on a shallow eminence in the sullen land, so that the windows of the cellar were a foot or so above the level of the frozen earth around.

The dungeon was old; older than any other building in the village. The priest dabbled a little in the ancient past and said that it might once have been the refectory of a very early monastery. But as long as anyone could recall it had been used as a lock-up for the surrounding hamlets to Stanston,

holding sturdy malcontents and wandering vagabonds for a few days to curb their desire to stay in the district.

Now it had a new use.

John Stearne shuffled across the stone flags, hawking and coughing, spitting out a ball of phlegm into one of the two braziers that smoked in opposite corners of the chamber. His spittle hung on the glowing metal and hissed and bubbled. The man's breath plumed out in front of him as he stooped and picked up some hewn branches from a small pile and laid them on the hot coals. Watching as they caught and flared at once, filling the dungeon with aromatic scent.

'I swear that the tang of burning apple wood is the finest of all, John,' said the older of the men, restored to good humour by the increased warmth and light.

As the wood blazed brightly it threw dancing shadows into the corners of the dungeon; an orange hue that illuminated the buttresses and pillars of grey, worn stone. A third man could now be seen, standing there, quite silent.

Watching.

'Can I set to with this slut, Matthew?' asked Stearne, wiping dust from his large, capable hands on a torn linen rag that he wore tucked into the broad leather belt.

Matthew Hopkins, who men were beginning to call the Witchfinder-General, warmed his hands at the flames. Sighing gently as he looked across at the helpless woman.

If only she had been a little younger . . .

Not that it mattered to his assistant, John

Stearne. Young or old, pretty or ugly, healthy or halt. It was all one to him.

Outside they were interrupted for a moment by a great cackling of laughter and the smashing sound of a bottle being hurled against a wall. And there was the shriek of a woman, either drunk or in pain. Hopkins recognised the tones of his female assistant, Goody Phillips, and guessed that it was ale that set her yelping.

Stearne also looked up from the stained wooden table, towards the crossed bars that glimmered red in the light from the fires. 'Goody,' he grunted. 'And those damned gipsy brothers of . . .' letting the sentence dangle, gesturing towards the third man who still stood half-hidden in the deep pools of shadow.

'Perchance you would talk to the Mendozas later, friend Stearne. Big though ye be, they would enter into discourse with you.'

The voice was soft. Hopkins was blessed with something of an imagination and in his mind he likened it to a finger-nail drawn softly down a black velvet curtain.

And the threat carried by the voice penetrated even through to the brutish brain of John Stearne. He turned to face the man in the shadows and his tones were more carefully considered.

'I wished no offence, Master Monk,' he said.

'I am sure of that, Stearne,' replied the gentle voice, 'and I am certain that the Mendozas will also be sure of it.'

Hopkins felt that control of the questioning was slipping away from him and he coughed. 'If you please, gentlemen. You had wished to see how the

Witchfinder-General sought out the malevolent evil of these creatures, did you not?'

There was a flicker of movement in the dark shadows. Stearne poked sullenly at the wood in the braziers, clearing his throat again, glancing at Hopkins for instructions.

'Aye. I shall ask her again. Remove the gag from the crone's jaws, Stearne.'

There was a twist of dirty linen rag knotted in the woman's mouth, held there by a cord of thin hemp. A cord that had been tied so tightly it had cut into the stretched skin of her cheeks, leaving a raised weal of flesh all around her face.

As soon as Stearne removed the crudely effective gag the woman began to pant for breath, a harsh rasping sound filling the freezing dungeon. Her eyes rolled from side to side and she fought to turn her head to see the third man, hidden in the shadows, as though he might have the magical power of freeing her from the waking nightmare.

'Spare me, Masters,' she whispered, voice cracking, air whistling in her scrawny chest. Hopkins noticed how the cold was making her withered dugs stand out as though she was aroused.

'Shall I begin again, Matthew?' asked Stearne.

Outside there was another burst of noisy laughter, and a duet of drunken women's voices, singing an obscene ballad about a virgin and a donkey.

Hopkins looked towards the figure leaning against the grey, dusty pillar. 'Your Mistress Hall has found her sister 'neath the skin in our Goody Phillips.'

Robert Monk yawned, dabbing delicately at his lips with a gloved hand. 'Aye, Master Hopkins.

The servants of the Lord must use what vessels they find, flawed though they sometimes be.'

Stearne laughed, the sound grating and loud, filling the underground room. 'You would ride many a country mile 'ere you find a vessel more flawed than our Goody. Many a time I've swived with her and tied me ankles to the foot of the bed, less I wake and find I have been quite sucked into her cavern of love.'

'Hold your tongue, Stearne,' snapped Hopkins. 'I will not have such license when we are about our work.'

The other looked away, spitting in the rushes that were scattered on the flags of the floor. Glancing out of the corner of his eye at Robert Monk, thinking how alike he was to the Witchfinder himself, Matthew Hopkins. Both smallish, neatly-made men, dressed in quiet, well-fitting clothes. Both with trimmed beards and moustaches and both wearing costly silver-hilted swords on the left hip.

Monk had appeared three days back, with his own entourage: the slattern, Liza Hall, who Stearne had vowed to tumble before they parted company, and the three hulking gipsies, Daniel, Benjamin and Abraham Mendoza, all close to six feet in height, with tight black curls that seemed pasted to their skulls. John Stearne was no stranger to violence and he saw the menace in the trio and kept himself more in check than was his wont.

It was a time for caution. The great War that split the land from top to bottom still raged, though in the South and the East it seemed to favour the men of the Parliament. There was even talk that the

King had fled the shores, though his damned cavalry were still likely to appear like smoking spectres from the mists at any moment. The country was filled with doubt and mistrust, the woods riddled with deserters from both sides. Twice Stearne and Hopkins had been stopped by such ragged bands. Once a handful of small silver had turned the day, the second time it had taken a ball from one of Matthew's pistols through the teeth of the leader of the vagabonds before they had broken and run.

Stearne wondered where this man Monk hailed from. There seemed the trace of a nasal Midlands sound in his clipped voice and he had once mentioned the awful state of the highroads from the North. He had turned up and closeted himself in deep conversation with Matthew Hopkins for three hours. Stearne had only caught snatches of their conversation, but he had learned enough to know that Monk wished to enter the business of witch-finding. Gold had changed hands and there had been an agreement that Monk would keep away from Suffolk and East Anglia where Hopkins and Stearne were doing such fine trade. With government near broken down in London, there was precious little power left from that source. Which meant that the little men had come into their own.

The real rulers of the land were now the magistrates and petty gentry. Those who had not gone to fight for either King or Country now stayed at home and held sway over their fellows with life in one pudgy hand and death in the other.

And they were the easiest of meat for a shrewd man like Hopkins who would feed them tales of vile wickedness. Tales that would often give these

men the opportunity to rid their communities of the half-witted, the gossips, the lame and the elderly.

For a little torture and an occasional small bribe these hamlets like Stanston were rich in pickings of witches and warlocks. It was a craft built on cunning, and one that Master Monk had come to learn.

Hopkins stood close to one of the braziers and warmed his hands at the flames. 'Step in here, friend Robert, and watch how we find out the truth of evil coursing through this village. Watch and learn.'

He nodded to Stearne. The sign to begin.

CHAPTER TWO

Bathsheba Connell was forty-seven years old. Give or take five years. Her father had been a cordwainer and her mother had been part Welsh, travelling around the country as Josiah Connell lost job after job from his liking for good ale.

For the last eleven years Bathsheba had lived alone in Stanston, keeping body and soul together by doing a little baking and some sewing. Occasionally making a shilling on the side by obliging some travelling tinker or journeyman with a bed for the night. A bed and her body.

Her mother had been something of a wise woman, with secret knowledge of herbs and plants. And Bathsheba had inherited her skills. Starting to give yarrow or comfrey to some of the men who visited her. Mixing up her potions in a small cauldron of black iron, ladling it into chipped earthenware beakers and stopperless vials. Most of the unguents were harmless and some of them might even have done some good. Particularly those that loosened cramped bowels and emptied ailing stomachs.

But what brought more and more men from Stanston and around to her hovel at the fringe of the forest was her willingness to let them lay her.

Hoicking up her muddied skirts and ramming into her. Bathsheba had never been loved by any man, and she came to believe that these faceless labourers were truly lovers. She even stopped asking them for their shillings. Content to let them use her in any and every way they wanted. Catering to them in twos and threes, lying still on her torn mattress while they used every orifice of her aging body. It didn't matter to her what else they did. The blows and the kicks were part of life to her and she welcomed their company.

But the women of Stanston came to dislike her. Then to hate her.

And it was only a month or so ago that one of the thin-lipped, tight-hipped goodwives of the village first dropped the suggestion to a neighbour.

'The beldame's witched our men.'

'A witch?'

Of course.

That had to be the answer. Why else should good husbands and fathers desert their beds and go into the damp green to lie with a woman who was sliding fast into her dotage? Why else but witchery?

Deviltry!

It was enough to get tongues wagging. Women gathered at the shallow part of the stream where they did their washing and they chattered as they banged the rounded stones on the wet clothes. Remembering things that had gone unaccountably wrong in Stanston over the previous days. For days and months and years: the Higgins' cow that had unaccountably trampled on both its new-born calves and killed them; and hadn't Ruth Higgins had a falling-out with Bathsheba only a week

before that day? What of poor Jem Wallis? Only a day after Bathsheba had caught him throwing stones at her pet cat he had fallen from the back of his father's bay mare and cracked his skull. Lying sleeping for two weeks and four days, close to death. Still not right in the head.

So the talk spread. Like a knob of butter dropped into a pot of heated water, it spread slowly, until it seemed to fill the place. Frightened of being witched by Bathsheba the men stopped calling on her. The stories gathered a vicious momentum when Henry Lockeston braved the tattle-tales and visited the old woman. Only to be stricken down with a plague of sores all around his mouth that festered and hung there like lumps of poison.

'And you know what is said?'

'What?'

'Of Henry?'

'Tell us, neighbour.'

The head turning to make sure nobody was overhearing the scandalous gossip. Voice dropping to a whisper.

'After he went with that woman . . . after 'tis said that Henry was no longer a true man.'

Hiss of indrawn breath, lips pursed. 'You mean he could not . . .?'

Nodding, arms folded across the breasts. 'He was not able to perform his husbandly duties. She had laid a curse on his privy member so that it slept and would not waken.'

'Oh, the horror . . . the horror . . .'

Bathsheba heard nothing of the gossips. It puzzled her that the men no longer came to her, but it didn't

interest her why they had stopped. The women of Stanston had never bothered to speak to her at the pump by the green when they came for water. Backs turned to her.

She had no way of knowing that the talk of her unnatural skills had reached the ears of Squire Pollinger who had invited kindly Parson Frewin over for claret and some venison. The two men had talked long, finally agreeing that a messenger should be sent for the so-called 'Witchfinder-General', reputed to be doing God's work in a nearby hamlet.

'If she be innocent then she has nothing to fear,' said the priest, battling to conceal his own doubt over their course of action.

'And if she be guilty . . . then Master Matthew Hopkins will have earned his fee.'

Bathsheba had thought it a nightmare.

She had been sleeping, wearing only a cotton shift, her fingers knotted between her thighs for comfort and warmth. A heap of stained blankets covered her against the biting cold outside and a merry fire still crackled in her stone hearth. Her black cat, Bell, was curled up in a withy basket near the fire, sleeping contentedly, the light gleaming off his glossy coat.

It was the day before the Eve of Saint Agnes. The nineteenth day of January. The year of Our Lord, sixteen hundred and forty-five.

Bathsheba Connell had no lock on the rickety door of her hut near the woods. With no possessions there was little point in guarding against a

thief. But the men who came for her – and their women – still kicked the door down. Bursting in and dragging the old woman from her bed, out into the frozen track. Hauling her by the wrists, mocking her fear and distress.

'Not so mighty now, witch!'

'Strip her naked!' yelped another of the wives of Stanston.

'Nay. Save that for the Witchfinder,' protested the bailiff of Squire Pollinger. 'She must not be harmed.'

'There's her cat. Look.'

'It's her devil's pet. She suckles that imp. Kill it.'

Bell was as frightened as its mistress. Jerked from a warm and comfortable sleep it had scampered between the legs of the screeching mob. Then it had paused on the fringes of the wood, looking back. Someone had kicked the lice-infested blankets into the fire, and the flames had spread hungrily to the dry walls of branches. Within three minutes the miserable hut was well ablaze. The yellow fire reflected in the cat's frightened, green eyes.

'It's turnin' to a girt demon,' called one of the older women, pointing a finger at the frightened animal.

Her husband was at her side, already shaking with fear at what the witch-woman, Bathsheba, might do to him. Lately his own capacity for making love had seemed less reliable than it had been. Perhaps he was cursed like poor Henry. The thought was enough and he stooped, picking up a jagged flint. Hefting it at the cat without even thinking.

The stone was well-aimed and it caught Bell at

the top of its left rear leg, sending it spinning to the frosty ground. It screamed in pain and fought its way to its feet, back hunched, tail bushed out like a fox. Hissing its rage and terror.

'Kill the bastard creature!' shouted someone.

'No,' said Bathsheba Connell, the first intelligible word she'd spoken since they took her.

'She pleads for her imp,' sniggered the wife of the alehouse keeper, bravely reaching out and slapping the prisoner across the face. The mark of her fingers bright against the pale skin.

The noise of the blow rose above the crackling of the flames and every eye turned to look at Bathsheba. In that moment the black cat decided that it would be best to be somewhere else and it disappeared silently into the dense undergrowth at the edges of the woods.

'The demon has vanished!' cried a teenage boy, his voice cracking with excitement and fear.

Every person in the crowd immediately crossed themselves, pattering prayers against the evil they suddenly realised could be among them. A cat could become a wolf, or a horned beast from the midnight reaches of the Book of Revelations.

So they took the woman. Hustled her to where the Squire and Parson Frewin waited. Throwing her into the chill lock-up, to wait for Master Hopkins and his brace of helpers. Since the word had already reached Matthew Hopkins, he did the old woman the service of not keeping her waiting long.

He had arrived a little after noon, accompanied by John Stearne and a fat woman who was already drunk. To the surprise of the Squire there was

another man with Hopkins. Introduced as Robert Monk, with his campanions, three surly gipsies and a second woman.

But only Hopkins, Monk and Stearne went down into the dungeon.

Time had ceased to have much meaning for Bathsheba Connell.

The hours blurred and the events that had her at their spinning centre no longer made any kind of sense to her fuddled brain.

She was naked, the shift torn from her by the muscular man called Stearne. He had mocked her, and touched her body. With strong fingers that had briefly roused her before pain swamped the momentary pleasure. He had pinched her breasts, punching her in the belly and laughing as she bowed to him, fighting for breath. Ragged nails had scored the soft flesh inside her thighs, making her whimper.

Another punch, this time to the side of her jaw, had laid her in the rushes, the stone cold against her bare skin. The woman had recovered consciousness, spitting blood and broken teeth, tied to a rough table, legs spread wide.

But there had been some moments when they had freed her. Stearne had taken her by a wrist, dragging her round and round the room, making her run. Letting her go and using a willow switch on her back and thighs to keep her moving, endlessly round and round.

Round, running.

'Confess, witch.'

On and on.

'Confess and you may rest, witch.' The voice calm and reasonable. The voice of a gentleman.

Endless running, until her feet bled.

'Tell us of your pact with Satan. Name your allies in your wickedness.'

Pain jarring through her entire body. Numbness in her back from the whipping.

'What of your imps? Your cat, that familiar of the Devil, old woman?'

'A black cat, Matthew,' said the one called Stearne.

'It was named Bell,' said the third man. Another gentleman. 'Named after Beelzebub, perchance.'

Twice she fell, being roused once by heavy boots thudding into her ribs, leaving purple bruises. The second time she was drenched in brackish water.

The two neatly-dressed men left at some time, and a fat woman came in. Called Goody by Stearne. She was the worst.

The running had stopped and once more Bathsheba was bound to the table. Stearne stood close by her, the coarse material of his breeches brushing against her hair. And the woman, drunk and foul-mouthed, began to touch her.

'Where's your imp fuck with you, witch? Here, at your saggin' bubbies? Open your mouth and let's see if there's a teat hid there.'

Bathsheba had done as she was bid. Deciding that if she tried to keep quiet then they might leave her alone and not harm her further. If only she had known what it was they wanted her to say then she would have said it gladly. Just to make them leave her alone.

'Keep your mouth open, witch,' Stearne ordered her, and she had done what he said. 'Goody, prove her. Find that suckin' tit and then we can break her. Matthew insists on proving.'

'We can swim her.'

Stearne laughed, busily unbuckling his breeches, tugging them down over his thighs. His penis, half-erect, dangling against the mouth of the helpless woman, touching her swollen lips.

'Don't cast your damned spell on this, slut, or I'll gouge out both your eyes.'

She'd serviced him, doing her best.

'She loves it, the witch,' said Goody Phillips. 'Best save some of that for me tonight, or you'll feel the weight of the back of me hand, Johnny.'

Stearne laughed, tangling his fingers in the hair of the helpless woman. Pushing his hips hard so that he filled her throat. Bathsheba shook her head from side to side, fighting to breathe, but Stearne was close to his climax and he ignored her struggles.

Bathsheba was tempted to bite down with her few remaining teeth, but she retained enough imagination to be certain sure what the brutal man would do to her. The pain from the ropes had faded and she no longer felt the cold on her naked body. Fingers squeezed her breasts and dug in the secret folded places between her legs, shaming her with their insistence.

'Open your legs wider, witch!' Goody Phillips punched the bound woman hard in the stomach, making her gulp, straining against the tight cords.

'Careful!' yelled Stearne. 'She'll gnaw off my dagger!'

'I need to see. I'll use a torch.'

There was a bunch of dry sticks and grass, bound with twine, lying near one of the braziers and Goody went and lit it, waving it to and fro with a rushing sound, making it blaze brightly.

'Wait . . . wait a while and I'll . . . I'll nearly . . . Aye, there it be . . .!'

He withdrew, leaving her slack-mouthed, jaw gaping and sore. He slapped her across the face as he buttoned up his breeches again.

'Close your lips, witch, now you've been honoured by me.'

It went on and on.

'Lift up your fuckin' arse, witch!' ordered Goody Phillips, snatching a handful of Bathsheba's pubic hair and tugging her back off the splintered wood of the table. Blood had congealed and she cried out with the pain of the skin being ripped.

'Hold the torch, Johnny,' said the woman, licking her lips with pleasure at the suffering she was able to cause the other woman. 'Closer.'

There was momentary heat on her legs, and Bathsheba closed her eyes at it.

'There. Back of her cunny, in that fold. That be it, John Stearne, or my name ain't Goody Phillips.'

Stearne leaned forwards, trying to angle the light to see better. But his hand slipped and he nearly fell, the burning torch dropping on the naked belly, making the curling, grey hair flare and sizzle.

Bathsheba screamed then. Loud and high and thin, like a stallion at the gelding. The sound filling the stone cellar, echoing on and on until it scraped at the nerves. There was the stench of roasting flesh and burned hair.

'Don't scorch the witch yet, John,' giggled Goody. 'Time for that and plenty later. After Master Hopkins and his fine new friend are done with putting her to the question.'

Stearne picked up the blazing torch and threw it casually into a corner of the dungeon, where it hissed and smoked and finally went out.

'Good work, Mistress Phillips,' dropping her a mocking bow.

'Lord, Master Stearne . . . I vow you will turn the head of a poor maiden with your honey tongue.'

They both laughed, ignoring the sobbing figure on the table between them. Stearne looked towards the window, showing a square of darkness. 'Time for you and I to go and sup.'

She walked round towards him. Her face was broad, and in her youth she had not been thought ill-featured. But now she was a couple of years the wrong side of thirty and too many days of drinking and too many nights of debauchery had left indelible marks. The cheeks were florid and seared with a network of fine veins. And the chin sagged towards the soiled bodice of the dress.

'And after that . . .?'

He reached for her, clasping her close and bussing her on the side of the neck. Though she might not be the finest of women as far as looks and manners went, John Stearne had never met a more vigorous competitor in the lists of love. If what they made twice or thrice a night could be truly called 'love'.

There were times when Stearne could have sworn that Goody managed two ups to his own one down!

Her thighs scorched, back bleeding and sore, jaws torn and face bruised, Bathsheba Connell watched

with incurious eyes as her torturers kissed at her side. They were as oblivious to her presence as if she had been a joint of smoked ham waiting to be cut down.

Her mind had never been keen. Nothing like it. But the events of the last hours had turned her quite mad. She even tried to smile at Stearne and Phillips as they made their way towards the heavy door, leaving her bound and naked.

The man paused at the top of the narrow flight of steps and looked back, his arm still around the spreading waist of his companion.

'A familiar imp called Beelzebub that disappeared in front of witnesses. Your finding of her witch's teat, so cunningly hid. The proven tales of her wickedness over the last many months.' He ticked them off on the fingers of his free hand. 'Aye, there be plenty there to satisfy the fumbling dotard of a magistrate on the morrow.'

'With more of her kin, if she proves willing,' cackled the harridan.

'And for names in our book there's silver in our purses.'

She was left alone, during that long, cold evening.

The following morning, Saint Agnes' Day, the sun broke through heavy banked clouds. It had snowed during the previous evening, covering the leaden land with a blanket of clean white. The watery light barely managed to throw any shadows as Robert Monk prepared to leave the village of Stanston. He sat his black stallion, attended by the Mendoza brothers, all wrapped up against the cold in layer

after layer of thick clothing. Liza Hall was seated on a small cart, holding the reins in gloved hands. She had passed longer than she'd intended with Goody and later with John Stearne and her mouth felt thick and furred from the drinking and there was a soreness to her loins from Stearne's sexual aggressiveness.

Matthew Hopkins had come to see his pupil off, though Stearne and Phillips had kept late to their beds. Partly because the ale had taken its toll of them.

And partly because the Witchfinder-General was greatly angered, blaming them for the loss of revenue.

The two older men shook hands, gravely, like clerks in a religious tribunal who have seen their masters reach a satisfactory conclusion. To a casual onlooker they would have looked oddly similar. Both neat and trim and grey. The overwhelming colour of Monk and Hopkins was greyness.

'I thank you for the lessons of the last day, Master Matthew.'

'I wish you well, Robert Monk.' Hopkins hesitated a moment. 'And if there is more I can do . . . or if there be some mighty coven that you uncover and require aid . . .?'

Monk smiled, rare as snow in August. A smile that struggled for existence on the fringes of his cold lips and never even considered trying for his eyes. 'I thank you. I understand the offer.'

'And the bargain?'

'Aye. I shall keep me to Hertfordshire and the western parts of Essex, Master Hopkins. And leave you the counties of Norfolk and Suffolk and all north of there.'

Monk's horse whinnied nervously and shied a few

jittering steps, hooves striking fire from the flints in the snow-crusted lane. It had been frightened by the door crashing open on the building near them. Stanston's tithe barn. A hulking figure lurched out, breath pluming around his bearded face in the bitter cold. The horse moved again, so that Monk struck it a blow between the ears and called down a curse on it.

'It's but a body, you poxy animal, so stand you still.'

'The body of a proven witch, Robert,' whispered Hopkins.

'So-called, but not tested in the court. As you have told me must be, Matthew.'

The barb was well-placed. Hopkins and Stearne and Goody Phillips would get little beyond the expenses for their journey from Bathsheba Connell. A witch who died during a swimming was one thing, but one that died of the cold because her interrogators left her naked and tied in an underground cell through a January night . . . that was something else.

But it had been an interesting and instructive time for Robert Monk. Hopkins had been open and expansive over a pheasant, some well-cooked venison and some good claret. Telling the inquisitive listener how to question suspects. Of running and swimming and testing for marks. It wasn't hard, and there were books and documents on how it should be done.

Hopkins was particularly informative on what corners might be cut and how suspects might be led along the paths you wished. How a single success was

of scant worth. But when some old woman or man was tired and beaten, then you would promise an easing.

Hopkins' small eyes had lit up over the remnants of their meal as he discussed that part of the task.

'Offer a warm bed and their own clothes. A quart of ale or a pipe of tobacco. Comfort for them, Master Monk. Rest from the running and the promise of a swift ending for them. Many fear the fire and will reach out to embrace the mercy of the noose. Suggest other names. Local tattle will aid you in the posting of such names. And then . . . then . . .' He had allowed the sentence to dangle in the stillness between them. Pointing to a circular pool of spilled wine that lay on the table. Dozy in the heat of the alehouse, several large flies had been investigating it. And one by one they had been lured into it, and there they had fallen victim to the fumes and all lay helpless.

Monk understood the allusion well enough.

'First one and then many,' he had said, rubbing a forefinger delicately across his lips.

It had been a useful day and night.

Now he watched Hopkins disappear again inside the alehouse, huddled against the chilling wind that came clawing in from the east, seeking out the marrow of men's bones. Small wonder that the lonely old woman had succumbed to the frost during the night.

Before setting his spurs to the flanks of his animal Monk paused and gazed at the corpse. The villager who had been allocated the task by the Squire of removing it had found it frozen stiff. To give the corpse any ease of handling he had been forced to

take a large wedge-hammer and break the elbows and knees. Otherwise the body had set in the cross-shape where Stearne had left her tied.

Chary of actually setting his hand to what everyone now believed had been a true witch, the man had taken a meat-hook and attached it to a length of stout cord.

Driving the metal hook through the taut skin of the old woman's bruised cheek, digging it hard into the angle of the jaw. Then heaving it with all his strength, rocking the body up the stairs, ignoring the way the rough stone scraped at the flesh. Ignoring the undignified flapping of the broken limbs and the unsightly spreading of the legs.

Excrement fouled the woman's thighs and blood came dark from nose and mouth.

It was a chilling vision for Robert Monk to carry with him as he rode off on his new profession.

Witchfinder.

CHAPTER THREE

The greening seemed as though it would never come to England that year. It was almost as if the Almighty had set his face against the country for permitting the awful Civil War to continue with its ravages and its bloody atrocities. Yet, during that long, hard winter, the fighting had been less. The cause of the Parliamentary forces swayed in the balance and only the New Model Army seemed to hold out hopes for the New Year. Money was being raised and friends called upon to lend their support and sometimes even their own swords, to aid the anti-monarchists.

Yet for John Ferris, a gentleman of Hertford town, the War was over.

And not over amid the crash of cannon and the huzzahs of a wild cavalry charge. For him the fighting had ended in a stupid accident.

Though the battles at the beginning of the conflict had seen him deep in action, earning swift promotion to the rank of Captain and, his own command of a squadron of horse, since the autumn of forty-four there had been less bravado and daring. The Royalists, led with dash by Prince Rupert himself, had become the threat with lightning attacks where they were least expected. And

the cavalry of the Parliamentary side were made to seem plodding by comparison.

Yet, just as the New Year came shuddering in, Captain John Ferris had been promised new adventures. As part of the formation of the Model Army, his commanding officer had selected him to take charge of an innovative unit. A hundred of the best riders and bravest spirits, with the finest horses that money or scrip could buy. Or could be stolen. To live off the land and plunder the supplies of the King's men. Harry and kill, coming out of the woods like avenging angels and then disappearing as swiftly.

The idea appealed to John Ferris' spirit of daring, and during the cold months he had roamed the south and east, seeking out the men who would be best for his force. Obtaining horses and laying his plans, scheming and listing and mapping, ready for the spring and the time that the dreaming could become a reality.

And then the accident . . .

John's parents lived in a largish, comfortable house on the eastern side of Hertford, towards the village of Stanstead Abbotts. Thomas Ferris was a doctor of medicine, married for twenty-four years to his beloved wife, Ruth. John had been their first-born, though he had followed on three successive miscarriages. Thomas had delivered the child himself, twenty-two years back, and had fought, tight-lipped, battling to save Ruth's life after a difficult breech-birth that had nearly killed both mother and son.

After that there had been no more children, and John had been raised alone. But his childhood had been mainly happy, and the home had been filled with warmth and love. Ruth Ferris was a small, bright-eyed lady, with hair as black as the wing of a raven, still vivacious and attractive despite being in her fortieth year. Doctor Thomas Ferris was tall, close to six feet, and skinny as a fencepost. He had always been a supporter of the Royalist cause, but not to the extent that he could not see and sympathise with some of the wrongs that the followers of Cromwell sought to put to rights. And John's decision to enlist with Commons rather than King had not split the family, as it had with others in a similar predicament.

John took after his father in height, topping six feet by an inch or more, carrying his fourteen stones easily on his broad shoulders and narrow hips. From his mother John had inherited the black hair, but his eyes were darker. An odd shade of grey. Slumberous eyes, heavy-lidded, that would suddenly flare into a red anger when he saw wickedness or injustice. He was a fair shot with a pistol and made a good fist with rapier or broadsword. Among his father's patients was a man who had been a Sergeant in the Army, and an instructor with all types of edged weapons. He had paid his bills with long hours of tuition for the young man. Long hours that were literally to save John's life on several occasions during the beginning of the Civil War.

The accident had happened on the last day of February.

John had been out riding a new horse that he had

commandeered for his own use. A raw-boned bay mare with a jaw of iron and the temperament of a cheated whore. But it was enormously strong and would have jumped the side of a church if he had put her at it. He had already decided that the beast would be too much for most of his new troopers and intended to keep her for himself. He had even gone so far as to christen the mare 'Morgana' after the famous enchantress of legend.

The snow had cleared but many of the lanes around Hertford were still running with streams of muddy water, and several brooks had burst their banks with the weight of the thawing. Ferris was cantering slowly along, between high, banked hedges, watching several gulls wheeling and crying far above him. The sky was blue across and the sun lay warm to his shoulders.

He never even saw the fox until it was too late. There was the blur of movement, caught at the corner of his eye. Something tawny, orange, streaking through a break in the thorns to his right, close under the hooves of Morgana, who reacted to the shock with predictable violence, rearing up onto her back legs, throwing her head from side to side. Jerking the reins from his gauntleted hands.

'Mary and Joseph!' John shouted, fighting for his balance.

But the mare was beyond his or any man's control, rearing, white-eyed, front legs raking the winter air. As it slid backwards, John tried to dismount, but he wore his long Cavalry boots and the heel caught in the stirrup, sending him spinning off to one side.

Yet he still landed safely, his left shoulder taking

most of the force of the impact. The heel snapped off and his leg came free, leaving him winded and gasping in the dirt of the lane. Morgana was still skittish and rearing, once falling on her side, neighing her fear, lips peeled back off her fine teeth.

'Be still,' he called to her, struggling to his feet, limping towards the horse. 'Still, damn you!'

His knee hurt him, and his whole left side was badly jarred, but he knew then how lucky he was not to have been more severely harmed.

. John Ferris was not to know at that moment that he was about to suffer a grievous accident that would alter his entire life.

As he came up behind the mare she turned towards him. There was a moment of frozen time when he saw what was to happen and he half-raised his left arm against the animal. Thus saving his skull from being riven like a ripe apple beneath a mallet.

Morgana was so terrified that she saw him only as another enemy coming at her. So she did what she thought best. She attacked him, rearing up to an awesome height, lashing out with her iron-tipped hooves.

John Ferris heard the blow.

Heard it rather than felt it.

A thick, cracking kind of a sound, not unlike a bunch of dry twigs being broken all at once. The impact kicked him back again in the mud, closing his eyes against the mare's vicious attack.

There was a numbness around the middle of his left arm and as Morgana moved away from him, calming herself now the threat was passed, he managed to sit up, feeling cold earth between the fingers of his right hand.

There seemed to be no feeling at all in the fingers of the left hand and they didn't move to his command when he tried them. Realising that he had been sorely hurt, Ferris managed to wriggle his injured arm free of the confines of his broadcloth coat.

Then he saw the crooked arm, the torn flesh, the bloodied stump of jagged bone protruding through the skin. For the first time in his life John Ferris fainted.

CHAPTER FOUR

His father drew lightly on the inside of the steamy window-pane, trying to show John just what damage the riding accident had wrought on his body. A bowl of soup stood neglected on a table near the window, small pieces of turnip and potato and carrot floating in it. And a glass of port wine, rich and red, stood by the bowl.

It was the tenth day of March.

The weather had taken a turn again for the chill. Many parts of northern England and the hills of Wales were shrouded once more in deep snow, and several nights of bitter frosts had laid thick ice over the pool of carp in Doctor Thomas Ferris' shady rear garden.

'This large bone, John, is the upper part of your left arm, properly called the humerus.'

'I find it is sadly lacking in any humour at present, Father,' he replied, trying a small jest. His father did not smile, or even acknowledge that he had spoken at all.

'These two smaller ones are called the radius and the ulna.' Tapping each one with the tip of his forefinger, slightly smearing his sketch. 'Radius and ulna. Here in the anterolateral view.'

'But what of my recovery, Father?' asked John,

trying to conceal his impatience.

He had lain in his bed, scarcely moving except when he needed to attend to his bodily functions, for every one of the ten days since the accident with Morgana. A passing carter had found him several hours after the fall and the blow. John had been barely conscious, not knowing where he was. The bay mare had been quietly grazing at the hedgerow only a few yards from her fallen master.

That day was only in his memory as scattered fragments, like broken crystal. There was the carter helping him into the wain. Jarring the smashed elbow. Long darkness. Ruth Ferris's concerned face, a single pearl of a tear on her cheek. Brief words.

'You have your wish, Mother.'

'How?'

'You wished I would not fight against the King.'

'Aye, son.'

'Now I fear me I shall never fight any man. Not ever again.'

The sleeping and waking, starting in a sweat, despite the cold of the weather. The blankets kicked off as he fought the pain. He had known from the unguarded expression on his father's face, as soon as he saw the dreadful injury, that it was worse than he'd thought.

The pain came and went. Sometimes welling at him like a flood tide, and sometimes merely there in the background. Like a persistent mouse nibbling behind the arras. The doctor did what he could for his son, but it was a fearful break.

'In most such blows, only a part of one bone will be cracked. Merely cracked, John. But with you,

there are severe breaks to all three bones. Here, here, and two more here,' stabbing again with his finger at the pane of the leaded window.

The first task had been to return the sharp, splintered bones to their rightful places, within the ravaged flesh of the elbow joint. The Ferris' elderly servant, Joshua Lightlantern, had told John about it during the tedious days in the bedroom.

'Dreadful, it were, Master John. I cannot yet set my tongue to callin' you "Captain" John, though I know that be your title.'

'Captain, no longer, Joshua. I will not carry arms again.'

'Blood flowed all across the table, and me holdin' a lamp so your dear father could do his work. He were weepin' as he cut and stitched, he were. Moanin' and carryin' on. Sayin' that you might lose the arm and then what would you do?'

It was a question that had bothered John Ferris mightily during that first week. His father came to the side of his bed a dozen times each day, checking the wound. Gently opening the bandages and smelling at it, trying to detect the odour of corruption and decay that would have meant the amputation of the entire limb. But John was healthy enough and the cold weather aided his healing. Within eight days Doctor Thomas was able to reassure his patient that his arm would be saved.

'Then I can soldier again?'

The answer took some time.

'I said that you would not lose that arm, John. I did not say it would ever again be . . . be as it had once been.'

'Am I to be crippled?'

His father shook his head at that. 'No. Cripple is too strong a word for it. There will always be a clumsiness. The damage was grave. Bones and the pads that lie between them. All torn beyond my poor skill.'

'I will be able to ride?'

His father laughed. 'You and that animal. Had it not been for your dear Mother's pleas I would have taken a poleaxe to the brute myself for what it had done to my only son. Yes, yes, you shall ride again. You shall do everything you did 'ere the accident. But some things will be less easy and you will do them with less skill.'

'Will I play the viola?'

'I think not, but . . .'

'Aye, I could not play it before so the loss is but little.'

That time his father did see the jest and joined his merriment.

Word came before the end of the month that Captain John Ferris was to be relieved of his command and was to be invalided out of the New Model Army, before he had even properly joined it. And that the grateful country had agreed him a pension of one shilling and four pence a week.

Ruth came and sat with him on the day the messenger brought the letter. She was doing some sewing, working on the corner of a lace kerchief, carefully embroidering tiny blue flowers.

'Forget-me-nots, John,' she smiled. The afternoon light threw long shadows across his room,

reflecting off the framed tract on the further wall.

'Father told you of my pension?' She nodded. 'Perhaps I shall buy myself a loaf of bread a day with it and sit by some quiet well.'

She patted him on the wrist. 'Be not so cast down. Your father and I love you mightily and we would not see you so brought low.'

'I know and I vow not to become tedious with my own miseries.'

She smiled at him once more. 'Your father has asked me to give you some tidings. Tidings that will cheer you, I think.'

'Tell me. There is a grievous shortage of such news.'

'Your Uncle Humphrey Ferris has passed on. We heard a week back, but we felt you should not be bothered until you were stronger.'

'The vintner, from Maidenhead?'

She nodded. 'The brother of your father, John. A fine man though too partial to his own products. It was that which carried him off. Near a gallon of claret and a surfeit of fried eels.'

'I had not seen him in many a year, Mother. A stout man with a full belly and a wall-eye.'

'Yes. To cut a lengthy tale down, he was willed your father his estate.'

'Much?'

Ruth Ferris bit her lip and looked down. A habit of hers when she was pleased but wished to conceal the fact. John saw it and forgot the pain of his shattered left elbow for a few moments.

'Near two thousand guineas, John.'

'A fortune!'

'And we wish you to have one half of it, son.'

His mouth opened and he readied himself to refuse the offer when Ruth lifted her right hand, palm open. 'One word, John Ferris, to say you will rebuff us, and I swear I shall strike you such a buffet across the ears that your head will ring like a welkin. Now, I mean it, John.'

'But a thousand guineas . . .'

'We have all we need here in Hertford. It will be good to have a small nest-egg if times should grow more hard as the land plunges towards darkness. But you need it more than we do, John. Now you can no longer be a soldier.'

'A thousand guineas. I could buy a farm, out towards Ware. Or Hunsdon. And have wealth enow to stock it with good cattle. Oh, Mother . . .! How can I . . .?'

'It is enough for us to see you happy, John. That is our care and our happiness. And we shall, mayhap, see a little more of you now that you are not to be off fighting hither and thither.'

'Indeed, I can not thank you as I would wish.' Unaccountably his eyes filled with tears. Happiness that his future was solved at a single stroke. A relation he barely knew, bloated and drunk, dying. And now he was rich. John Ferris laughed and laughed, laying back against the snowy pillows, feeling purged of the stink of the battles and the deaths. A farmer he would be.

And a good son to his parents.

And . . .

'I am well enough to see Mary, Mother. Can Joshua take word to her that . . .?'

His mother shook her head. 'Lackaday, Johnny. Would such a virtuous maid come to your beckoning and calling? No message will bring her.'

His face fell at the news. 'But if Joshua was to go and ask her to . . .'

Ruth picked up her sewing and stood, head on one side. 'I cannot chaff you, and you still white and drawn with that poor limb. She is here, John. Waiting only my call to climb the stairs and see you.'

He found it hard to believe that life could offer such a change. Only minutes before he had been sunk into the slough of despondency, unable to see around the next bend in the pathway of life. Seeing only bleakness and pain and penury.

Now all that was changed.

Riches and his beloved Mary.

'Oh, sweet day,' he sighed.

Mary Villers was nineteen years of age. The youngest child of a strict Puritan family that lived in a neat cottage in the village of Widford, only a few miles away from Hertford. Her father, Jabez, was a stone-mason. Her mother had died a couple of years back of a bloody flux, brought on by drinking fouled water during a drought in the summer. Mary was a pretty girl, with long flaxen hair that she wore tied back in a severe coil to comply with her father's wishes. She was the tenth child born to Jabez and Martha Villers, seven of whom still lived. An unusually high proportion at a time of staggering infant mortality.

Like many of the more rigid Puritans, Jabez had given his sons names with a high moral tone. The oldest boy was Praise-God Villers. Then came Reformation and Diligence, twin brothers. The

other surviving son was called Seek Wisdom And Deny Sin Villers.

There had been little love lost between the Villers and Ferris families, and John and Mary never had the chance to see anything of each other. But the death of Martha had changed all of that.

John's father had refused to help, knowing that the Puritans were hostile towards him and his family for their Royalist leanings. This was before John had enlisted with the Parliamentary forces. But Mary had called on him, falling to her knees and begging for his aid to try and save her mother and two of the boys who were also dying from the illness.

The call came too late for Martha Villers, but Diligence and Praise-God were both spared. Jabez Villers was a hard man, but he was also a fair one, and he came and shook the hand of Thomas Ferris.

With that reconciliation had come the chance for friendship between Mary and John. The chance that they had both so eagerly embraced. During the months friendship had slipped unnoticed to affection, and then into love, though it must be admitted that lust had also played a large part in their relationship. John had been virtually a virgin, having only swived a handful of times with local trulls from Hertford. Mary Villers was an enthusiastic player of the game of sexual encounters and she had taken him as a boy and brought him panting into full manhood.

Jabez knew nothing of this. Had he learned of their frequent couplings, with no benefit of clergy, he would have taken his stone-mason's great hammer and crushed the head of the tall youth.

Their love for each other grew and grew. If the truth be told, in the early days of their relationship there were times when Mary's passion for making the beast with two backs between the blankets almost frightened him. She would, on occasion, rut like a bitch in heat. Her eyes would roll back white in their sockets and her mouth would open like a poacher's spring trap, teeth gleaming. Oft-times she would moan and cry out so loudly that it became their practice to use a gag of soft cloth to quiet her, lest any of her relatives should hear her.

And her nails! Many a time John would have to conceal himself from his mother and father as he washed at the pump in the yard, so bloodied were his back and shoulders from her ferocity.

Truly it roused him, yet it also concerned him. For at such moments Mary Villers, placid, blonde Mary, would be like a woman possessed of demons. Yet the rest of the time she was quiet and decorous, as befitted the youngest child of such a religious family, paying suitable attendance at the church in Widford.

Some scant months earlier two things had come to pass, on the same day, that had effected a radical change in their relationship.

It had been a warm day, a watery sun struggling through early mist. Mary had come calling, finding that both of John's parents were out. Joshua Lightlantern had been despatched on some errand or another, and the quiet house was theirs to command.

While he made sure that the bolt was slipped on the doors, both front and rear, Mary walked up the

creaking stairs. In the stillness he caught the whisper of sound as his beloved lady let her dress and shift fall to the floor of the bedroom. The bed protested feebly as she lay across it; halfway up the stairs he could imagine what he would find, and the front of his breeches became uncomfortably tight, in the manner that had now become familiar to him.

Mary was waiting, laying on top of the neat patchwork coverlet. She was quite naked, but for a length of demure black ribbon knotted about her throat. She was smiling up at him, her right hand busily burrowing between her spread thighs. Her nipples were erect, casting small shadows across her firm breasts. In the dim light of the curtained room she seemed like an erotic nymph, seeking drowned mariners in her undersea cavern.

John breathed a great sigh and lay across her.

But that morning had been different.

Her passions had raged more strongly than before. The gag barely sufficed to check her screaming and blood came worming from the corner of her mouth where she had bitten through her own lips. It was only by using his own great strength that John was able to remain safely in the saddle, thrusting at her, feeling her hips grinding up against him, so hard that he feared for an accident to his manhood.

Just as he sensed his seed boiling in his loins and he prepared to spend, he felt her shudder beneath him as if someone had thrust a dagger between her third and fourth ribs. Her whole body went limp and he felt the warmth of her urine flooding against his thighs. John eased back from her and saw that

her head hung sideways on her neck as if she'd been poleaxed. Her eyes were open and staring, pupils tiny and rolled upwards so that they seemed all white. Mary's mouth was open, lips pale around the gag. Breath came in juddering gasps, hoarse in her chest. Her fists were clenched, nails dug deep into her own palms.

John had come close to panic. He had pulled away from her, his erection fading like the dew in the morning. He ripped the gag from her mouth, patting her cheeks and chafing her wrists. Covering her with a heavy blanket he had run naked down into the kitchen. Returning with some brandy, he had forced a few drops between her parted lips, using more to rub on her skin.

After a minute or two she began to recover consciousness, coughing and spluttering, trying to sit up. Colour had flooded back to her cheeks and she had seemed puzzled and angry at what had happened.

But it had frightened John, fearing that any recurrence of the strange happening might even lead to her death.

The second event that day was the news that Matthew Hopkins, the Witchfinder-General, and his colleagues were abroad. He was reputed to have hanged a dozen women and men together, not fifty miles from Hertford town. John had come across Lightlantern that afternoon, talking of the events with a stranger. A travelling tinker who had been present at the mass execution, and who was telling his story with much lip-smacking relish. John was sickened by the man's enthusiasm for the suffering of poor wretches, but one thing that he said struck a chill note.

'The weakling of the litter was but sixteen summers of age. Pretty, like a doll, with hair colour of straw. Hopkin's creature, Stearne, had his way with her, they said. She had lain with most men in the district, bewitching them with her wiles and potions. They did say that what gave her away as the spawn of Satan was that she kept no hold on her passion.'

'What does that mean?' Lightlantern had asked the tinker, while John listened eagerly for the reply.

'Her senses deserted her while coupling, friend. She swooned away, eyes rolled back in her skull, and she mouthed strange, beastly words. By that did they know her as a witch.'

After that day, John had been steadfastly refusing to lie again with Mary, drawing on a fund of excuses that he hoped would last until they could be wed and there would be no shame in their bedding. But until that day, he was set in his mind that he and Mary must keep chaste.

He had told her that he now wished to save their passion for lawful loving and she had argued long and bitter. But finally she had agreed, lowering her head as she whispered her passive consent to his word.

Now she was here.

Mary Villers walked into his bedroom and he struggled to sit up, cursing under his breath as he banged the splinted elbow on the carved headboard, feeling himself flush beneath the heavy nightdress that he wore. Though Mary had seen him naked often enough he felt a damnable ninny

to be seen in such a way. His mother was nodding and grinning in the doorway.

'I shall be off now, son,' she said. 'I have to go and meet your father. He has mislaid his case of knives and has to cut a stone for Master Otway.' She rested a hand on the sleeve of the young girl. 'You must take care and not rouse his blood today, my dear. Doctor Ferris says he must be calm and quiet.'

'Will you be gone long, Mistress Ferris?' asked Mary Villers.

'I hope to return in time enough for the evening meal. Before dark. Joshua is also out on an errand, so you two young people must needs guard the house for us against robbers and other sturdy vagabonds.'

She blew a kiss to her son, who blushed yet more deeply, then turned and clicked her way down the narrow staircase, along the flagged hall and out through the front door. He heard the sound of her feet through the loose stones of the path and the creaking of the gate.

'The rest is silence,' grinned John, trying to break the uncomfortable moment that lay between them, like a dead hand on a sword-hilt.

'She is a good woman,' said Mary.

'Aye. And right glad that her only son's war is now fought and over.'

'Until your elbow heals, John, my dearest. Then you will doubtless be off again for glory.'

He shook his head, patting the bed for her to sit down beside him, but she chose to seat herself in a rush-bottomed chair at one side of the room. It had been a long time since they had last seen each other. Though Jabez had approved of John's choice of

fighting for the Parliament, Mary had been less than happy. Moaning that she would never see him again and that she would be a widow with no money, or caring for some poor legless cripple.

There had been no definite talk of a wedding between the two families, but it had been gradually understood that they might wed once the battles had ceased. Whenever that might be.

'You did not come to see me,' the girl pouted, accusingly. Blue eyes fixed on the wall behind his head as though she had no wish to meet his gaze.

'I was home scant hours to collect horses. I was trying to break Morgana when . . .' he paused. 'When she broke me. I vow I would have come to call upon you that very afternoon, had it not been for the mishap.'

'Just to call upon me?'

'Aye, Mary.'

'Would you not have wished to do . . . more, John?'

The suggestion could not have been more clear had she writ it large in the blackest of ink upon a great sheet of parchment and he felt himself blushing yet again.

'We have sworn to keep chaste now until we be wed.'

'You swore,' she said, voice rising. 'I did but agree as a dutiful maiden should when her master speaks.'

He was shamed by her words and she saw it in his face. Relenting. 'They say, John, that you have been hurt grievously.'

For the first time she looked directly at him and John felt his heart leap in his chest for her beauty.

And his loins suddenly filled with desire for her body. Despite his own fears and doubts he wished to fornicate with her. The day was chill and she wore a heavy cloak over the white starched linen apron and brown dress. Her hair was coiled up beneath a modest coif. Mary was most wonderfully beautiful.

'I will never march to war again. But I will ride as well as ever in a few weeks. Father says that less than a month and I will be hale once more.'

She stood up and stepped to the side of the bed, placing herself just out of his reach. For the first time she was smiling and he felt the tension easing away from them both.

'Your mother's message spoke of some kind of inheritance.'

'Yes. An uncle has joined the choirs celestial and I am shortly to have one thousand guineas for my own usage.'

'A thousand guineas! That is what I . . . I am so pleased for us, beloved.'

'I shall buy land, Mary. Once this damned arm is mended I shall saddle the iron-mouthed and evil Morgana and go to Cambridge. There to examine cattle to be bought for my farm.'

'Our farm, John?'

'Of course. You look exceedingly well, my love.'

She shuffled a little way along the bed towards him, her hand spidering until it reached his foot.

Ankle. Knee.

'Mary!'

'Your servant is out and you heard the words of your mother.'

He swallowed, finding that there was, of a sudden, not sufficient air in the bedroom to fill his

lungs. The small fire in the grate spat and crackled as some damp wood caught and burned.

'It has been long months, John. I have been cold where you should make me warm.'

Her fingers were working their way to the tops of his legs, gripping him through the blankets.

'Mary, we have agreed.'

'Aye, but you needs must know that a woman feels the need for loving as much as any man. More, some say. You have your great tom leech under there that should be applied to my chilled parts to warm them. What say you, my eagle?'

'I say . . .' his voice was cracking in the upper register and he tried again. 'I say that I said what I did because I believed it was right. As with all things I have ever done. I believed in the cause of right and justice and so I went to fight for the land. I saw sights that made me doubt whether there was indeed a right or wrong. Now the Lord has sent me this injury, this affliction, to show that I needs must remain a man of peace. A farmer and not a soldier.'

'Then if you truly love me we shall be wed.'

'Oh, yes. Of course we will.'

'If we are to be husband and wife, and if we have already committed carnal sin many times, why must we stop?'

Her hands reached for him and he pulled away from her touch. Loath to allow her to feel how his body rebelled against his commands and swelled for her.

But at the back of his mind was the vivid picture of how she had been. How she had swooned away in the throes of her violent, almost inhuman passion. And of what he had learned of the practices of the witchfinders.

'No,' pulling away from her to the further side of the bed. 'No. We have sworn to wait now until we are wed. That is my word and that is my bond. I would not be forsworn for this, Mary.'

She looked away, her hands fumbling with the draw-laces of her bodice. He could see that she was angry, her breath coming fast as though she had walked a steep road. Then she shook her head and turned back to look at him. Whatever battle she had been fighting with herself had clearly now been won.

'Then we must soon set the date for our wedding, dearest John.'

His mind was greatly eased to see how his sweetheart accepted his decision that they should still refrain from any sexual activity. Though he was almost overcome with desire for her body and her passion.

'Aye, soon, Mary. First my elbow. Then to Cambridge. The lawyer is there who holds our affairs. Mayhap I shall be able to obtain from him the thousand guineas that he keeps and I shall purchase some cattle for my . . .' he corrected himself immediately, 'for *our* farm.'

'And the land?'

He nodded. 'The land shall come first. A goodly plot where we may live long and well, with our thriving family. God's wounds, but there is yet so much that must be done!'

'But when can we . . .?' she insisted, voice plaintive, hands knotting in her lap as she sat once more in the chair.

'It is still winter, my love. Let us wait a whiles until I am hale once more. I shall then ask your

father for your hand in marriage. Until then let us keep our formal betrothal to ourselves. Perhaps we can be wed by . . . by May. That would be wonderful, my love. A May bride with the warmth of the sun on our faces and bright blossom on the heavy branches. It will be fine, Mary. A goodly day for a goodly bride.'

'Will you tell your parents?'

'Aye.'

'Your mother will raise no word?'

'Nor Father. He likes you, Mary.'

'There is little love these parlous days for the Ferris family, John.'

It was a bolt of thunder from a serene summer's sky.

'What? What do you say, woman?'

She looked into the fire where a log was crumbling into soft ashes.

'Not you. Your enlistment was well done. But your father and mother make scant secret of their own fondness for the ways of the King and heresy.'

'Heresy! I do not believe what my ears are hearing, Mary.'

'It is true. There are those, and you must pardon me for repeating this, but you should know, dearest. Know that there are those around the villages who believe your father and mother are in league with the . . . with the Devil himself.'

'This is such foolishness.'

'I know that, John. And so do all folk of good sense. But your father is a skilled man at healing. And your mother aids him.'

'He is a man of the greatest virtue.'

'He has offended with his harsh tongue.'

'My father does not suffer fools right gladly, as you know.'

'I know that your father does not suffer those he *believes* to be fools at all,' she replied with a flash of fire.

'I knew naught of this.'

'It has only blown up as the winds of war drive hardship to us all. Those who are for the King in these parts are not greatly loved.'

'But, witchcraft, Mary! It is so foolish as to be almost laughable.'

'Almost, I grant you. Aye, that I do grant you.' She stood up with decision. 'I shall talk no more of it. It be but foolish gossip as you say. And when the sun comes it will melt.' She stood by the window, looking out across the garden. 'Oh, there is a small coney, scampering for its burrow. So sweet and innocent.'

John was bewildered. It was such a day as he had never known. The news of the money and the passionate minutes with Mary. His own final commitment to marriage. Plans for a farm. And then the mortar-shell of his parents being suspected as heretics, or even witches.

But she was right. It was a spectre of winter and the threat of the war moving closer to the area. With the spring it would go away and all would be as it had been.

But his fears were strengthened that very night, when a large flint came crashing through one of the windows of their kitchen, nearly striking his mother. Both his parents tried to pass the event off,

But Joshua came in, seeing the broken glass. 'Not another one, Doctor,' he said.

So it had not been the first time that some vindictive local had shown dislike. John decided that it might be better if he could persuade his parents to move from Hertford, to some safer town.

But there was time enough for that.

Less than twenty miles from Hertford, a small caravan was camped for the night. A covered wagon, with a woman asleep in it. A large tent with three gipsies. And a smaller tent with a middle-aged man dozing alone in it.

Robert Monk, witchfinder, was on the move, hungry for silver.

And blood.

CHAPTER FIVE

The situation with the good people of Hertford and its surrounding villages grew worse. John Ferris' elbow finally healed. Healed as much as it was ever going to. And he was once more able to get out and about.

Only then was he able to experience for himself some of the hostility that Mary Villers had mentioned to him that cold afternoon in his room. There were turned backs where once he might have looked for smiling faces. There were no more invitations to dine with the local gentry, when all three of the Ferris family would have been welcome at any table in that part of the county.

Only once did he try to raise the matter with either of his parents.

Doctor Ferris sniffed and half-smiled. A weary, saddened smile. 'They call me warlock, John, and your dear mother a witch. Such are the times we have fallen to now all men are to be considered the equal of another. We must persevere until the better days of sense come again.'

His mother started to cry and ran away from him when he mentioned it, tugging her apron over her face.

After that he held his own council and simply

kept his guard. He also took some care to make sure that folk knew, while he was there, he did not expect any trouble to come the way of his parents. And that if anyone was caught throwing stones or doing any other sort of mischief then he would personally run his cavalry sword through both their kneecaps.

So the active trouble disappeared. For a time. But the whispering and hatred seemed to increase.

April. The twenty-second day of the month. A damp day, warmer than it had been, with a feeble sun trying to work its way through a morning mist.

John had saddled Morgana, taking care to keep well clear of the animal's rear hooves. Since his own accident the mare had kicked three more people, including the ostler at the Pied Merlin.

His father was away on business, delivering a child for a farmer out beyond Ware. Despite the building animosity against him, Thomas Ferris continued to do what he could for those who still welcomed his services. Though their numbers seemed to shrink by the day. But Ruth had come to the front gate to see her son off on his travels.

'You have the money safe?'

'Aye. But I shall need little of it. The bulk is secure with Father in his safe-box.'

'And you have food for the journey?'

'Mother. I have been a soldier. I know how to provision myself. I have food and drink enough to get me to Cambridge and back thrice over.'

'It is only that . . .'

'I know.'

'You do understand, son?'

'I do, Mother.'

'You will return in three days?'

'I trust that I will.'

'God go with you, my son.'

'And with you, Mother.'

He swung up into the high saddle, feeling a twinge of pain in his damaged elbow. His mother smiled tremulously up at him and then turned suddenly, running back towards the house. John was about to set his heels to Morgana's bay flanks when he saw Joshua Lightlantern standing watching him from the corner of the garden.

'What is it, Joshua?'

The old man moved closer, looking around as though he feared that he might be watched. He carried a billhook in his right hand, its edge polished smooth with use. As usual his breeches were held up with knotted twine.

'Make haste to return, Master John.'

'I have to see the cattle, Joshua. Before hazarding my inheritance on that farm I saw, I must see what the cost will be of filling it.'

'Aye, well . . . Be not longer than you needs be.'

'Why?'

'I've said more than I wished, Master.'

'You mean that my mother and father are in some danger?'

The servant rubbed a gnarled forefinger along the side of his bony nose.

'There's those that have scant love for the Doctor. Some say aye and some say nay, if ye take my drift.'

'I know of the damned gossips and ditch-rakers, Joshua. But there has been no more than words.'

'That's as may be, Master John. I have heard . . .' The sentence drifted away on the light wind.

'What?'

'I will not say.'

'Then be damned to you!' snapped Ferris, his right hand feeling for the hilt of his sabre, a sudden rage flooding through his veins.

Lightlantern stepped quickly back, fear filling his rheumy eyes. 'Strike old Joshua, Master . . .' he quavered. 'I needs must dwell in this town. I will not sink with all and that is my dread.'

'I am sorry, Joshua. Sorry for my anger.' He slowed his breathing, patting the mare on the side of the neck. Recovering his own composure. 'But my parents are more dear to me than I can say. I have heard the foolish talk of witchery and selling of souls to Satan. It will pass. And no man here in Hertford would dare lay hands on them while I live. Nor harm you, old friend.'

Lightlantern showed little sign of being reassured by the words. 'Mayhap,' he muttered. 'But great ill can be wrought by words, Master John.'

Though Ferris tried once more to press him as to his meaning, the old man would have none of it. Mumbling that there was work to be done in the small orchard at the back of the neat house, walking away, shoulders stooped, the billhook swinging in his hand.

As he walked his horse away from his home, John even considered abandoning his mission to Cambridge. Perhaps it might be better to take the

threat seriously. On a sudden impulse he turned the mare's head towards the Widford road, deciding that he would call upon his betrothed and seek her opinion.

The day was fine and his spirits lifted, so that he whistled a merry jig to himself. A lark rose from a thicket to his left, soaring into the heavens, piping its own song. It was barely an hour before he saw the white cottage, with its patterned plasterwork on the walls, where most of the Villers family lived.

Diligence was hoeing in the nearest field as he cantered up and John gave him a bright 'good morrow'. The young Puritan was much of an age with John, but he had always seemed older, more solemn. He rose from his task and gave Ferris a slight bow.

'Good morrow to thee, Brother Ferris. And may the blessings of the Good Lord Almighty go with thee on thy journey.'

'I thank you, Diligence. Is Mistress Mary within?'

'Nay. She has gone with our father to visit his sister who is sickly.'

'Oh.' John was disappointed, feeling the shadows of the earlier part of the morning crowding in on him once more. He had looked for reassurance from his beloved Mary, and now she was not here.

'Will they return soon?'

Diligence looked up at him, face unchanging. It was impossible to guess at what was going on behind the smooth cheeks and veiled eyes. Finally: 'If soon be within the hour, I think not. If it be

within the day, then I think they will.'

Time was somewhat pressing. John had already made up his mind that he would try and return within two days rather than the three that he had originally planned on taking.

'Tell her I called upon her.'

'I will.' A long pause. 'Thee is going far, Captain Ferris?'

'Captain no longer, Diligence. Yes, I go to see the market at Cambridge.'

'Thee leaves thy father and mother?'

'Of course I do. Should I not?'

Diligence Villers shook his head at the question. Slow and solemn. 'Nay. Doubtless the Lord Almighty will take them beneath his all-sheltering wings as with any orphans of the storms. I wish thee well, Master Ferris. A safe journey and a safe return.'

'Thank you.'

He moved on northwards, uneasy. First Joshua and now Diligence. Something wicked was afoot and he must take all care.

As he rode he checked his sword came easily from its scabbard. And that his gun was ready in his broad belt. It was a Spanish pistol, made by Ripoll of Catalonia, and it was his pride and joy. He had picked it up after a skirmish near Gainsborough, some eighteen months back. Lying near the corpse of an elegant Cavalier, headless in a ditch. The pistol had a miquelet lock and a distinctive ball butt. There was ornate silver chasing around the barrel, the lock and the butt, and the only damage had been the tip broken off the spur trigger. It was a fine gun, reliable and accurate.

John had practised with it a great deal, improving his shaky marksmanship until he could safely hope to hit a man at forty paces.

The ride to Cambridge was uneventful, the road mainly quiet.

He passed a group of strolling players who shouted a cheery greeting, and a dozen silent monks, hooded, trudging stolidly on some mission of their own. A carriage bowled past him at speed, nearly forcing him into the hedge, and there was the glimpse of a pale, pretty lady, holding a nosegay to her face against the dust and smell of the highway.

The only other group of travellers during the morning were headed in the opposite direction from Ferris. A cart, wheels caked with mud and showing the signs of much hard use. Driven by a chubby woman in a stained skirt and a blouse, but lower at the bodice than John would have considered decent and proper. She was smoking a pipe, resting her feet up, showing a deal of white calf.

'Good day, bonny lad!' she called, leaning sideways and spitting into the road.

'Good day, Ma'am,' he replied, reining in to let the cart pass.

'My, but you're a sturdy fellow. If we were not on business I'd be cheered to set down and swive with you an hour or so.'

Ferris was shocked at such brazen effrontery, deciding that the woman must be a whore, with probably more of her kind within the canvas

cover of the wagon. So he was doubly shocked when the cover twitched aside and a middle-aged man peered out. His face was that of a clerk, with a trimmed beard and moustaches. For a moment John feared a trap, particularly when he saw three horsemen appear around the further bend of the road. Big men, on spavined nags. From the curls to their hair, he guessed they were probably of the gipsy persuasion.

'Hold your vile tongue, Liza Hall, or I shall dismiss you from my service.'

The woman stared down, glancing up and winking at John Ferris to show how seriously she took the threat. Yet the voice did have something of great menace to it. Quiet, and yet sibilant, like a snake moving across smooth ice. Nonetheless, it was the voice of an educated man.

The three gipsies had all reined in, some thirty paces beyond the cart, spreading out a little. Thoughts of an ambush came to John and he was grateful for the weight of pistol and sword at his belt.

'Good day to you, Sirrah,' called the older man. 'A fine morning it is.'

'It is indeed.'

The exchange was formal and polite, with no scent of danger to it. And afterwards John Ferris went on his way, heading for Cambridge, leaving the gipsies and the small cart to go on in the opposite direction.

The only question the clerkly man had asked him before they went their separate ways was how far it was to the town of Hertford.

For a mile or so John Ferris wondered what such an ill-assorted quintet would be doing in Hertford, but the sun was shining and the road clear and he soon put the thought from his mind.

CHAPTER SIX

It was a sore disappointment to John Ferris to see how the great war was depleting the land. The market at Cambridge would once have been a busy, bustling affair, filled with farmers and peddlers, hucksters and acrobats, all intent on trading and having a good time. Now it was a bleak and sorry place.

There was one small troupe of actors putting on a morality play from the tail of a wagon, to a crowd so sparse that a collection would not have bought clogs for a legless man.

And the livestock. Some of it in such a miserable state that it was hardly alive enough to qualify for the name. A couple of dozen horses and mules, most looking as though the loading of a single pannier would bring them to their scarred knees. And the sheep and cattle were little better. Poor creatures, their owners demanding inflated prices for them.

John chose to spend nothing of his inheritance at the market, deciding that he would do better to purchase the farm he wanted and then go about stocking it at his convenience, using local stock whenever it was possible. So for the time being, the thousand guineas in gold would remain safely tucked away at home.

Doctor Thomas Ferris was a careful, untrusting man when it came to money. Using his own skill and labour he had carefully built an iron strong-box into the wall of the main parlour. Concealing it behind a dull oil-painting of some oysters and a bunch of dark purple flowers set on a table. Apart from himself and his wife, only John and Joshua Lightlantern knew of the existence of the hiding-place. And the family knew that Joshua was totally to be trusted.

His thoughts turned to the iron box as he rode back on the Hertford road from Cambridge the next morning. Recalling that there was one other person who knew where the money was safely hid.

'Mary,' he said, smiling to himself as he thought of her beauty. Surely the most lovely girl in all of Hertfordshire. 'Nay, in all of England,' he added. And within a very few weeks she would be Mary Ferris, his wife.

She knew about the safe. One evening, when his parents had gone early to their beds, he had sat in their parlour with Mary. Perhaps 'sat' was not quite the word that he sought. She'd been up to her usual sportive tricks. Tempting him by touching him through his breeches. Lifting up her skirts.

'See, dearest. I wear no underpinnings so that I am ready for you.'

'My parents,' he'd protested.

'Pish to them.'

'But there will be . . .'

All along he'd wanted to do it. Wanted to lay her down on their best carpet and make violent love to her. Regardless of whether the Pope and

the Archbishop of Canterbury should both be in the room. And now that they had set a date. . . .

'My fortress is open and ready for the ravaging soldiers to invade it. Storm it. Do what you will.'

So he had. Their coupling had been as ferocious and fiery as ever. By the sheerest fortune his mother had happened to come down the stairs just after they had finished. It was an easy matter for Mary to drop her skirts and sit demure by the fire, while he hastily buckled himself together, suddenly noticing a damp and sticky patch on their carpet, which he was able to cover with his boot. Ruth Ferris had noticed how flushed they both were and had suggested they move a little further from the hearth.

It had been after that.

Mary had started to talk about their plans for the farm and for the future. Urging him to begin to look for a place as soon as possible, chattering on about the new clothes that she would need as befitted the wife of a leading owner of land.

'The money is safe, is it not, my brave lover?' Mary had asked him. Nodding when he said it was well hid. Then pressing him to tell her. Though he refused her at first she wore him down by pestering him. Using her fingers on him and then her soft, warm lips, until he would have told her anything.

But Mary was totally to be trusted. It was a great reassurance to John to think that.

He had left Cambridge after a leisurely breaking of the night's fast. The inn had a groaning board

awaiting all its guests and John Ferris proved himself a sturdy trencherman. Tucking first into some smoked gammon with a brace of eggs. Then there was some mackerel, served with bacon and some new-baked bread. The landlord offered him special mulled claret to take the chill off the morning, which simply sharpened up his appetite once more and sent him back to the table for a bowl of scalding vegetable soup.

While in the city he spent a while looking around at the shops. Trying to find something for his mother and father, finally settling on a pair of pewter tankards, one large and one small, that would be ideal for the quiet evenings when they all sat together and drank ale, united as a family.

By the time he set Morgana's nose in the direction of Hertford and the south, it was close to eleven in the morning. And he realised that he would have to press on at a good pace if he was to reach home before dark o'ertook him. And his worries over any threats to his parents made him eager to return within the two days he had set for himself.

It had rained during the night and the track was muddy, pot-holes filled with rain that made the journey treacherous. Morgana was a great-hearted, sure-footed beast, but even with the best will John was aware that time was slipping by him at a great rate.

Though he made no stop for a midday break, it was closing in on five in the afternoon and still nine miles to go. More rain threatened and the sky

lowered down making night seem all the closer.

The road dipped down into a hollow, between two stands of oaks. A swollen stream gurgled under a stone bridge that carried the path. As he came down into the dip John caught the odour of a wood fire, somewhere among the trees to his right. Travellers seemed all to have given best to the evening and he had seen nobody for the better part of a half hour.

They came clopping into the gloom at the bottom of the dip, close to the narrow bridge, when the mare stopped. Digging in her heels and refusing to move. Head shaking, pawing at the muddy road.

'Come on! On, damn you!' He raised his hand, about to give the horse a stinging slap on the rump, when he saw movement among the trees. There were men there.

'I see,' he said, quietly to himself. That was why Morgana had stopped, scenting trouble. Casually Ferris stood in the stirrups as though he was stretching his muscles, glancing around behind him. As he'd feared there were two dark figures there, cloaked and caped.

'Easy, Captain,' came a voice from ahead.

'Who goes there?' he replied, throwing back his own cloak so that he could draw easily at either sword or pistol, depending on what was needful. A group of men who came out of dark woods at evening against a lone traveller were not likely to have a peaceful discourse on their minds.

Four of them. Six, counting the two at the rear. With the possibility that there might be more of the rogues skulking among the dank oaks. The

light was so poor that it was difficult to see whether or not any of them carried pistols. If they were peasant ruffians it wasn't likely that they would be so armed with guns. More likely with cudgels, and perhaps a stolen sword or two between them. More than likely they would all carry daggers of some kind.

'I asked who goes there?' he repeated.

'You be a soldier, Master?'

'Yes. I am a Captain.'

'For which side, Master?' came another voice.

'For the true side, fellow.'

There was a general murmur of assent at that reply. The four were now grouped closely together, just on the far side of the bridge, while the other two were coming nearer. Perhaps forty paces off.

'I asked who you were and what your business was? Footpads, are you?' There was no point in backing off from them. Show the least sign of fear and the dogs would be at your throat. John Ferris knew that right well.

'Footpads, Captain! Cruel words for us old soldiers fallen on evil times.'

'Soldiers. From what army?'

His right hand rested on the butt of the pistol. He had already picked out the leader as being the one with a large hat, several sizes too grand, hanging upon his ears. There was a temptation to ride at them, but if they chose to fight they would bring Morgana down in the mud and he would be lost. Better by far to remain mounted and hope to cut them away from him before they could engage him too closely and crowd his sword arm.

But if it came to a shot then it would be the shortish man in the hat that would take the bullet.

'From what army, Captain?'

'Aye, and stand your ground there.' They were sliding in closer than he wished to see them. Morgana was becoming even more restless.

'We be all loyal men and true.'

'Of what side?'

'The same as you,' said another of the men.

'King or Parliament?'

There was a clear hesitation. 'Parliament, Captain.'

It was a fairly safe guess in the eastern parts of the land.

'Where have you fought?'

Again a hesitation. Ferris saw faces turning to look at each other. Then the leader replied. 'Marston Moor, Captain.'

'With which leader?'

'Fairfax.' The name faster. More certain.

'Who stood on your left in the line?'

'It was . . .'

'Which Fairfax was it you were with?'

'What?'

'Which Fairfax?'

'The older.'

'Not good enough, friend. It was Sir Thomas or it was Lord Fairfax. The former was on the right, near to Long Marston. The other stood 'twixt Manchester and the Scots. I was there.'

'And now you're here, friend,' replied the leader. 'And here you'll fuckin' stay.'

Ferris drew his Spanish pistol, already with the miquelet lock on half-cock. Aiming and firing

quickly, picking the leader for his target. Despite the poor light, the range was close enough for him to feel confident of scoring a hit.

The ball smashed into the robber's neck, kicking him flat on his back in the mud at the centre of the bridge. Legs flailing, a scream beginning, choking on his own blood.

Immediately Ferris holstered the smoking handgun, drawing his sabre with a flourish, setting his spurs to Morgana.

His hope had been that the men would have fallen back from him, dismayed by the death of the man he had shot. But they were more brave or more desperate than he had guessed and they surged forwards against him with a low, animal cry of anger.

'Back, dogs!!' he yelled, flailing with his sword at them. Amid the mêlée he caught the sound of running feet, and he knew the other two were sprinting down the hill behind him.

It was a bitter fight.

Five of them against one. But he was well-mounted and had the advantage of his military training and experience. It was possible that the men were deserters, running from enlistment. Men turned thieves and killers by harsh necessities.

The first of them to come against him was killed instantly. He wore a floppy hat, like his dying leader, and the brass-hilted sabre hacked through it. Through matted hair and scalp, burying itself in the top of his skull. The man cried out at the ferocious blow, twisting and falling.

Wrenching the sword from John's hand, nearly

spraining his wrist. The robber fell to his knees then rose again, running in small circles like a headless chicken, crying out in a reedy voice, the sword still buried in the top of his cranium. The last glimmerings of evening light caught the bloodied blade, making it dance and shimmer like some bizarre head-dress. Blood and brains slithered over the villain's face.

A third man grabbed at the bridle, though John tried to kick him away.

'Bring the bastard down!' yelled a deep voice, taut and ragged with fear and excitement.

Morgana was whinnying her terror, lashing out behind and putting one of the attackers down on his back, clutching his thigh and cursing loudly. John drew his own knife, seeing the glitter of steel all around him, cutting at the arm that held the bridle, but someone parried the blow. There were hands on his leg, trying to unseat him and he felt a sharp blow in the top of his left thigh.

With the mare held, he was better off her back, and he managed to swing his leg up and over the pommel, punching at the nearest face. Feeling the satisfaction of bone splintering beneath his fist and a yelp of pain.

For a moment he thought that the remainder might be put to flight. There was one hanging on the horse's head, eyes white and frightened at the animal's anger. Another getting up a few paces back, rubbing at his leg, bent double. A third was holding his face, crimson jetting between his clenched fingers. The leader was still, his floppy hat at his side. The fifth man was now sunk to his knees, the sabre still lodged in his skull, his life to

be counted in fleeting seconds. And the sixth man, holding a thin-bladed flensing knife, point low, in a fighter's crouch.

'Go and I'll spare you,' called Ferris, left hand reaching cautiously for his own wound. Touching the back of his left thigh, coming away sticky and warm. But the wound seemed shallow.

'Fuck you, coz,' said the man with the knife, circling him, feet shuffling in the wet mud. 'We'll have you down and opened from pate to gizzard for what you done.'

'Aye, stick the bugger,' hissed the one at the mare's head.

'Let go the horse. Come aid us,' added the man with the injured leg, hobbling towards John, a broad butcher's knife in his right hand.

Despite all it was still four against one. Even the man with the broken nose was showing signs of being eager to enter the fray again, wiping away the blood from his mouth with the back of his hand.

John tried to watch all four, turning constantly, his own horn-hilted dagger flicking at the nearest man. Though he kept a brave face on it, in his heart he knew that his chances in such a fight were not good.

Morgana was released and galloped off down the road towards Hertford, disappearing in the mist and gloom of evening, the sound of her hooves fading and becoming inaudible. Apart from heavy breathing and the shuffling of boots in the dirt, the only sound was the bubbling of the water that flowed beneath the little bridge.

'All at one, lads,' muttered the robber whose nose had been broken.

John was watching for his moment. The thief turned to look at his fellow next to him, taking his eyes off their victim.

Ferris was quicker than a striking adder. He darted forwards, fast and light, the point of the blade seeking out the man's stomach, slicing through cloak and jerkin, past the linen undershirt. There was warm blood spurting on the back of his hand from the force of the deadly blow. As he withdrew his dagger he deliberately twisted his wrist to give the thrust more lethal effect.

'Jesus and the angels, I'm fuckin' done,' cried the man, dropping his own knife and grabbing at himself, looking down unbelieving at the amount of blood that gushed from his sliced belly.

Three down and dead or dying.

John saw the balance tilting in his direction and new hope was flooding through him – when there was a blinding flash of pain and he felt a great blow at the back of his head. Darkness seemed to spill up from the earth and wrap itself around him. He saw, as if time was slowed, his fingers opening and his blood-slick knife dropping into the dirt. There was a yell of exultation from behind him. Through the rushing blackness he guessed that one of the robbers had picked up a large stone from the side of the road and hurled it at him. With devastating success.

'No . . .' he said, his voice silent in his own ears. 'Mary . . .' he tried.

Then the cold wet dirt came sweeping up and hit him on the side of the face.

The kicks to his ribs did him little harm through his thick clothes, but they did, for a few moments, bring him back to a kind of consciousness. His eyes blinked open and he saw the three figures crowding around him, jostling each other as they lashed out at his inert body.

'Bastard, bastard, bastard,' chanted one of them in a vicious monotone, keeping time with the words and the blows of the boots.

Then John Ferris saw an odd thing.

So odd that his brain refused to believe it and he decided that it was some bizarre vision of impending death.

One of the three men disappeared from view, his neck sprouting a great jewel. A green jewel that spouted dark blood.

A second turned and . . . and then there was a clunk of wood on bone. He fell, also vanishing from John's eyes, and there was a rattling sound as if some stick had dropped on the road.

Hooves. A horse cantering in their direction.

The last man. No, there were now two of them. They had reinforcements, John thought, hopelessly.

But one was floating in the air. Held aloft by the other. Screaming and begging for mercy. John blacked out again for a few seconds and when he again opened his eyes there was nobody in sight.

But he heard a loud, dry snap, like a man setting his heel to a stubborn branch. A gurgling sound that stopped. A loud splash. It was all very puzzling. Darkness beckoned and it seemed very welcoming to John Ferris. Just as he slipped finally

into it he saw the oddest thing of all.

A face was bending over him, smiling at him.

But the face was as black as jet.

Black.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It was night.

Either it was night, or he was in some kind of a cave. No, it was night. The rain-clouds had cleared away and John Ferris was able to make out some stars, twinkling faintly above his head. As he slowly recovered consciousness he was aware that he was out in the open, under trees. He could hear the light wind through the spring foliage. And smell the damp mould of the forest.

A fire was burning brightly a few paces from him, small branches crackling and glowing. And there was the pungent smell of something cooking in a round iron pot that hung over the flames.

'Rabbit,' he guessed.

'That's the way of it, friend. Old brother coney simmering away for us.'

The voice was rich and deeply resonant. Like a preacher at the further end of a long tunnel, echoing. John raised himself up on one elbow, then winced and lay down again, almost overwhelmed by a great wave of nausea.

'That would be the head, friend. Lucky you were that those dogs didn't break it like the shell of an egg. Close they came.'

John closed his eyes, reaching up and tenderly

touching the back of his skull, just behind the right ear. There was a lump there that felt as though someone had slipped the egg of a large goose beneath the skin.

'Lie still and rest. You have been far from this world for some hours.'

'What is the clock?'

The voice hesitated. 'I think something around three in the morning. The coney is near done.'

'What happened?'

'You do not recall.'

'There was . . . what is the clock?' Ferris vaguely thought he'd asked that before, but there was a painful throbbing behind his eyes and his brain felt muzzy, as though it was wrapped in a London fog.

'It is around three. I think there is some hurt to your mind, friend.'

'Yes. I can not see clear. I was on my horse making for home.'

'Where is home?'

He kept his eyes tight closed. Feeling better that way. 'It is . . . Marston . . . No, Cambridge.'

'You were on the road from Cambridge, ahorse for Hertford town.'

'Ah, that is it. I live in Hertford. With my mother and father.'

'Your name, friend?'

'I am John Ferris, late Captain in the army of the Parliamentary forces. I fell and hurt my arm. My horse! Where is Morgana?'

'Safe, Captain Ferris. She came and watched as I carried you here. I tethered her to a great oak a little distance off and . . . she . . . has . . .'

The words seemed so far away.

Ferris slept again.

When he woke he felt a little better. He opened his eyes cautiously and saw something out of the oddest of dreams. There was the first light of the false dawn illuminating a clearing in a forest. The fire he recalled from before still burned well, and there was still the faint scent of the cooked rabbit. Through the oaks he could make out the bay shape of his mare.

But none of that caught his eye like the figure who knelt by the fire, looking gravely in his direction.

'Am I woken?' asked John.

'Aye.'

'And . . . and are you black as ebony?'

The man nodded, smiling, showing a great cavern of gleaming white teeth.

Ferris blinked and sighed. 'Then I am truly woken . . . but I am greatly confused.'

'Will you eat, Captain Ferris?'

'Captain no longer. But I would be most pleased to break my fast. The sickness has passed and I am somewhat better.'

'I shall give you a little of the stew. But not too much on an empty stomach.'

'I am most ravenous. I feel as if I have eaten naught for a week.'

'Only a night and a day and another night, Master Ferris.'

It took a few moments for the blackamoor's words to sink in.

'What?'

'You slept with that blow to your pate. Slept most of the first night. Woke for a while. And slept all the next day and night.'

'And you . . . you stayed here with me, Master . . .? I do not know even your name. God's wounds but I owe you my life and I . . .'

The black handed him a tin plate filled with rich stew, and a horn spoon. Calming him with a smile. 'Easy, Master Ferris. Easy. I will tell you something of what came about while you break your fast.'

'Your name, first.'

'York. Brutus York.

He was the second black only that John Ferris had seen in his life. The first had been a negro dwarf in the service of Lord Fisher of Maxwell. His name had been 'Antonio' he recalled.

'Give me your hand, Brutus York, and know that you have a friend for life in John Ferris of Hertford.'

The man was immensely powerful. As tall as John, but broader built, with a handclasp that felt as if it could shatter marble.

The rabbit smelled delicious and he set to, nearly burning his lips on the first mouthful. Pausing only to ask the black to tell him something of himself, and of what had come to pass two nights ago.

'I was captured in Africa by a Portuguee slaver, when but a child. That was some nineteen years ago. He sold me to a Serbian merchant who sold me to a chandler from Dieppe. From there I passed to a countess in Copenhagen. She used me well. Still a slave, but master of her in the night.' Again that engaging grin.

Ferris had heard stories of the vast size of the

privy member of the black males, and he guessed what Brutus' tasks had been for this titled lady.

'Then to London. First to Hull. The lady tired of me. I was sold to the master of a schooner. He sold me first to a merchant from Scotland. A man who . . . who wished to use me as the countess.'

'Ah,' said Ferris, knowingly. He'd heard of such men, believing them to be afflicted of some blasphemous sickness. 'What did you do?'

Brutus ladled out more of the stew for him. In the background he heard Morgana snicker softly.

'What did I do, Master Ferris?'

'Aye. Call me John, and I shall call you Brutus, as friends should.'

'I snapped his neck for him as easy as a maid breaks wet thread. Then I came to London, afoot. There to a man of the law who took the money I gave him and freed me. I have the papers here. He said to carry them always.'

'Money?'

'Aye. The buggerer had gold in his purse. I took it.'

John Ferris sucked thoughtfully on a narrow bone. Feeling his strength returning to him by the second. 'You did rightly, Brutus, as payment for his most vile usage of you.'

'I was going away from London. There is little work there for me.'

'And you saw those villains attack me?'

The black nodded, squatting back on his heels. He wore thin breeches, cut off above the knee. And a battered pair of black boots. A jerkin of dark wool that he had tied about his chest with a blanket of grey. His hair was cut short, close to his skull,

like a man who normally wears a wig.

'I did, John. John.' He tasted the name a second time, as if he rolled it around his mouth to draw out the full savour. 'There were six. A hand and a finger,' holding out two huge hands.

'I slew some. But my memory is blurred as smoke. How many?'

'It was the sound of your pistol that brought me first from hiding. I had seen these rogues and been chary of them. He took the ball in the throat and died. Another you killed with your sword.'

'Through the head?'

The negro nodded vigorously. 'Aye, John, setting him to leaping about like a poleaxed calf. He died 'ere I came out. Then one was stabbed to the guts and fell spilling his lights in the dirt.'

John Ferris finished the plate of stew, licking it clean, feeling the pleasant warmth in his stomach. Still puzzled how a whole day had slipped by unnoticed. There was a seed of worry that he had not been able to keep his word and return home within the two days. But little could happen in such a time in their own town.

York ticked off the three corpses on his broad fingers. 'Then you were down and off the horse. A coward's blow. A stone from behind, John, laid you low, and gave you that fearsome lump on your pate. They fell to kicking you, and lucky it was that they chose not to slit your throat at once. I came upon them . . .'

'And?'

'One I slew with my own dagger as I came in. He died fast. A second with my club, here,' pointing to a massive cudgel, its end roughly rounded.

'I recall seeing one of the dogs flying without the aid of angel's wings,' grinned Ferris.

The black smiled in response. 'He flew and then sadly broke his back on landing.'

'The bodies?'

'It will be days 'ere they find them. And there will be scant concern for such gutter-hearts. I heaved each from yonder bridge and let the water carry them where it will. I care not.'

'Nor I. And . . . Brutus, I thank you again from the well of my heart for sparing my life. My parents will make you right welcome and I would be honoured if you would come with me to Hertford and meet them, and share our board.'

The black shook his head.

'Why not, Brutus?'

'I thank you, John. Your offer is kind. Kind beyond all . . . But I am not as you are. Many see me and run screaming to their houses, thinking me a demon from your Hell. I have been beaten and shot at for my colour.'

Ferris sighed. 'I am sad for that. Such lackbrain people should not flourish on this earth. To so fear a man for his colour alone. But if you are with me, then all will be well, Brutus.'

York looked doubtful. 'It is possible.' With sudden decision. 'I shall test it with you, John Ferris, and right gladly.'

'Mary and Joseph, but I am happy for that. We shall go within the hour.'

But it was not to be.

While Brutus began to make ready for their

journey, saddling the fretful Morgana, John threw back the blankets that had kept him warm and attempted to stand up – immediately measuring his length on the soft ground beneath the serried oaks. The fall didn't hurt him, but it made him dizzy, bringing back the sickness so that he lay still for a while, finding the earth a wonderfully comforting place to be.

The black came running when he saw his new friend lying in the dirt, but John reassured him that things were not too much amiss.

'I fear me that the blow to my head has done more harm than I knew, Brutus.'

'Should I go for help?'

'No. It is a scant few miles for me and I would not worry my parents with the threat of ill tidings. And if it was brought by . . . by someone like . . .' he stammered, trying to find a way round his own embarrassment. But the black did it for him.

'You mean a blackamoor, John. It might make your mother think that Satan himself has come for her. Or that some dark warlock has been sent for her spirit.'

The jest about warlocks and demons brought back to John his own fears about the local feelings against the Ferris family, but he tried to set them to one side. He was not well enough to travel and that was that.

It was two more days before he was able to stand without swaying, and set himself once more into the mare's high saddle. During those two days he had slept a great deal, twice waking and bending

double with griping stomach pains. And his sight seemed less clear than he knew it should be. Blurred and occasionally blanking out in the one eye, on the same side where the stone had struck him.

But finally, late on the next day, they were ready to go.

'Methinks it is a Sunday, John,' said Brutus. 'I heard the bells of Hertford town a while earlier.'

'Sabbath supper will be a goodly meal. If we can but reach home so that Mother has time enough to prepare something for us all.'

'You are certain all will be well if you bring me with you, John?'

'Indeed, you have my word on it. Now, let us be gone.'

He had checked his pistol, making sure it had been cleaned and reloaded. And his dagger and sword had also been wiped by the negro, and replaced in their respective sheaths. The two pewter tankards had suffered no damage in the skirmish, and his eyes brightened at the thought of how pleased his mother and father would be at the small gift. And how pleased he would be to see his dearest Mary once more.

It seemed that an eternity had passed since last he set eyes on her.

Darkness came crawling over the county as they neared Hertford. Ferris kept the bay to an easy walk, the tall negro loping comfortably alongside him. It had grown cold again and there was nobody around. Up on the town gallows, set on a hillside to the north of Hertford, Ferris noticed that there

were two fresh bodies dangling there. No doubt some wretched malefactors who had paid the supreme penalty for their crimes. He must remember to ask his father about them.

'Where is your house?' asked York.

'Barely two hundred paces from where we stand now.' Seeing a neighbour standing in his garden, near to the road. 'Good even to you, Master Waring.'

To his surprise the man looked around as though a culverin had been discharged immediately behind him. Seeing Ferris, then registering the tall blackamoor with him. Gulping, jaw sagging. Retreating along his path, nearly stumbling over an ornamental rockery. Finally breaking and running for his house, slamming the door firmly shut behind him with a crash that echoed all along the narrow lane.

'That is . . . strange,' murmured John. 'What ails him?'

'Perhaps the sight of me,' replied Brutus. 'It happens right often. I am well used to it.'

'No. He was frightened 'ere he saw you. It was me calling to him that set him to terror.'

Further along the lane Ferris noticed curtains twitching as he rode by with Brutus York. Doors opening an inch and then closing. And a little child being dragged in by its mother as if Death itself were galloping along the way.

'It is as if the plague itself was in the town, and we were travellers thought to carry it,' said John, keeping his voice low as if he were in a church. The whole atmosphere was odd, frightening.

'Have soldiers been?' asked the black.

'There is no pillage. No house is harmed at all.'

He reined in, just before the corner that would reveal his own home. A sudden chill gripped his stomach and he realised that he was sweating. The blurring in his one eye had become worse and he felt dizzy.

'Are you ill, John?' asked Brutus York, reaching up a hand, concerned at his friend's pallor.

'I know not, Brutus. But there is something here that is wicked and wrong. Damnably wrong.'

He heeled Morgana on the few paces to the corner, pulling sharply on the reins to halt the mare. The negro stopped at his side, looking along the narrow lane to the house.

'Oh, Mary and Joseph!'

'John, they . . .' began Brutus, his voice tailing away as he saw the foolishness of saying anything further. Words were of no use.

The Ferris cottage stood open to the elements, door swinging crookedly from a single hinge, windows smashed and staring. There were the signs of a fire.

'Mary and Joseph,' whispered John.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The concussion from the blow to his head was still lingering and John could recall little of what happened in the next hour or so. He remembered dismounting from Morgana, letting the reins dangle over her neck, walking towards his home, stumbling like a man in a dream. The front gate was broken off, the trim hedges trampled down by heavy feet. The flower beds and the herb garden that had been his mother's pride and joy were also furrowed by countless boots, plants snapped off in what was clearly deliberate wantonness.

'Brutus . . .' he'd said, finding that his eyes were suddenly brimming with bitter tears.

'I'll tie up the mare and follow you, John. But take care. Draw your pistol. The rogues that did this may still . . .'

The rest of the sentence faded behind Ferris as he pushed aside the dangling door and entered his home.

'Mother! Father! Are you there?'

The echoes came back, cold as a midnight tomb. And he knew that they were gone. Perhaps fleeing from the mob to some friendly house. Or to relations in Ipswich. His best hope was to find a note. Or Joshua Lightlantern might have word from them.

'Joshua!'

The tears stopped as he made his way around the building that had once been his home. Once. Now it was a ruined shell. Whoever had come and done this had taken a malign delight in wrecking everything. There was not a single article of furniture that hadn't been snapped and broken. No piece of crockery unsplintered. Carpets had been torn and hacked.

And there was the smell . . .

He heard the negro come in behind him, pausing on the threshold and whistling in dismay.

'They are gone, Brutus. At least I can thank the Almighty for that. They are fled somewhere to safety.'

The oak dresser that had held a collection of blue plates was overturned and smashed. John went along the stone corridor, pausing to look into his own room. It was perhaps less damaged than the rest of the house, but all his clothes had been torn from drawers and scattered everywhere. Someone had fired a pistol through a picture on his wall of the great cathedral in Paris. It had been a gift from his parents on his sixteenth birthday. He wondered whether he would weep again, but there were no tears left. Just an iron resolve to track down the animals who had done this to his home.

'Why, John?' asked Brutus, following him, stepping cat-footed through the debris.

'I had heard word . . . Oh, but I should have listened and taken heed! There was a fear in this town that my mother was a witch and my father a warlock. The idea was so . . . so damned stupid that I could not give it credence. Yet,' waving a

hand around him, helplessly, 'this shows it was no idle fear.'

The smell was worst in the room where his parents had slept. And the damage was worse there than anywhere else.

Nothing was undamaged. The bed was smashed to the floor, the mattress looking as if someone had ripped it apart with a pike. And someone had emptied their bowels among the feathers and slashed cloth.

On the wall, daubed with pitch, were the words from the Book of Exodus: 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.'

'What does it say?' asked the negro.

'What?' said John, dazed by the horror of his homecoming.

'I have no way with words. No lettering, John. What does that say?'

'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live,' he replied, turning on his heel, walking from the carnage, pulling the door closed behind him.

Oddly, he slept. Sat down amidst the rubble of the parlour and slept. Only waking when Brutus brought in some cheese and a part of a loaf.

'It was under the table. What had once been a table. There is no other food. And there is a mouthful or two of ale in a broken crock. But no vessel to drink from.'

John sat up, rubbing at his eyes. Blinking in the light of a candle end that the negro had stood up on the sill of the window.

'I had not wished to sleep.'

'It is the head, John.'

'You said there was ale.'

'Aye. But we needs must lap it up like dogs in the road.'

'In the bags on my saddle. There are the two tankards I bought . . . I bought as gifts for my mother and father.'

The black disappeared, and John tore off a hunk of bread, cutting a sliver of cheese with his horn-hilted dagger. Gnawing at it, though there were precious little pangs of hunger at such a moment.

The candle flickered dangerously in the wind through the broken glass. John realised that he felt very cold and he tugged his cloak about his shoulders. His eyes roamed around the room, thinking back to how it had once been. A parlour often filled with friends and laughter. Good company, sipping at mulled claret, passing round plates of mutton and bread. His father with legs spread in front of a crackling log fire, holding back the tails of his coat. Telling some medical story that would make the men chortle and some of the women protest in mock dismay. Or Ruth Ferris singing a madrigal in her fine, pure voice.

'Where are they?' he said, not even aware that he had spoken out loud.

'Here is the ale, John,' said the black.

'I have need of brandy, rather than this weak stuff. But it will serve when nothing better be here. I thank you, Brutus. It is good to have company at such a bleak moment.'

'On the morrow we can ask where they have gone,' said the blackamoor. 'Not all the good folk of Hertford can have played a hand in this sorry game.'

'Truly said. And Joshua lives no great distance from here. Mayhap we should go now.'

'No. The night is dark as pitch, John. And there might be folk in the blackness who would also bear you ill-will. At dawn.'

Ferris nodded. Knowing that the negro's words made good sense. But it was hard to sit patient with the knowledge that his parents might not be far away from him.

Neighbours double-locked their cottages that night, sliding bolts firmly home. Shuttering windows and going fearfully to their own beds.

A chill wind blew from the east across Hertford, cutting through the budding trees, whistling around the eaves of the houses. On the gibbet on the hillside to the north of the town the two corpses danced and swung, rattling in their cold chains.

It was barely dawn when John Ferris started awake. 'The gold,' he exclaimed.

'What?'

'I have an inheritance, friend, York. And my father had . . . There, behind that tipped-over table against the wall.'

He stood up, unable to credit the shambles of the house, sighing and swallowing hard to recover his lost composure. Surprised that in the shock of the previous evening he had not thought of the gold, hidden safe in its strong-box. But his concern for the well-being of his mother and father had come first.

The negro moved the oak table as though it had

been made from parchment. Behind it should have been the faded oil-painting of the oysters and purple flowers. Concealing the iron safe, set into the lath and plaster of the wall.

'Gone.'

John Ferris had once been kicked in the groin by an angry whore in Cheapside, who had mistaken him for a fleeing customer. The pain and shock came back to him as he stared blank-eyed at the gaping hole in the parlour's wall. There was not even any sign of the strong-box itself. Whoever had taken it had known. Must have known.

'It was in there?' asked Brutus. Seeing the faint nod of the head in reply. 'Then it must be time that we go and seek answers, friend John.'

The lane was totally deserted. On a Monday, after seven of the clock, there would usually be folk bustling about their business. Children playing before being sent off to the dame school. There wasn't even a stray dog to be seen.

John and Brutus stood together at the entrance to the garden, looking both ways. Morgana was tethered at the rear of the house.

'There,' hissed the black, pointing to a clump of sycamores. 'A man stands there, in the shadows.'

As John looked, the figure disappeared, moving back among the trees. But he was sure he recognised him. 'Joshua.'

'A friend?'

'Servant. Perchance he fears being seen talking to us. Let us follow him, Brutus. But keep at a distance from him.'

He eased the pistol in its holster, not looking to left or right. But feeling dozens of eyes drilling into him from the houses on either side of the lane.

'He goes north,' said the negro.

'There is open land there, towards the hill. Joshua took me ferreting after conies when I was a stripling. He will wait there, I think.'

They walked away from the centre of Hertford, leaving the last of the cottages behind them. They could hear a chained cur barking from inside, and a man's voice shouting at it. The lane disappeared at a thick hedge, with a stile set in its centre. It was easy work to vault it, leaping a water-filled ditch on the further side.

'It *is* Joshua Lightlantern.' John could see the old man now, wearing his moleskin breeches, and a velveteen jacket, his broad-brimmed hat pulled well down over his grey hair. He turned once to make sure that he was being followed, starting visibly when he glimpsed the giant negro at John's side.

'He carries a knife,' hissed Brutus.

'No. I think 'tis a billhook. Keep a distance from him, friend.'

The path wound through a copse of willows, then over a tumbledown bridge. The recent rain had swelled the water so that it nibbled at the roots of the trees. There was a gate to their right that led into a broad meadow. John recalled how there had once been an archery butts, but it was long abandoned.

At the foot of the final slope, on the hillside that was dotted with rabbit warrens, Joshua paused once more. Hesitating as if he were unsure of which direction to take. Finally deciding and darting with unusual haste into the cover of some stunted trees.

'We have him,' grinned the negro, pressing on as if he were on some hunt.

'Harm him not. He has come to tell us where my parents are. I am sure of it.'

The light was dappled among the trees, throwing a changing pattern of sun and shadows. Joshua had stopped on the furthest side of the copse, at the high point of the slope, where it opened out towards the crown of the hill and the gibbet with its macabre fruit moving gently in the morning wind.

'Master John,' he said, voice tight, showing his fear.

'Joshua. I am rightly glad to see you safe and hale.'

'What be . . .?' pointing at Brutus York, who had paused a few paces behind Ferris.

'A friend. Though his skin be black, his heart be true as any white Christian. He saved my life when I was set upon by footpads on the Cambridge road.'

'Ah. That be why ye be tardy.'

'Yes. I came home and found . . . found what had been done. Who was it? When did they come? Over the trumpery talk of witchcraft, was it? And where are my mother and father?' He had raised his voice with each question, until he was shouting at the old man. Who cringed as though he had been slapped in the face.

'Master John . . .? he began, then he folded his head down into his wrinkled hands and began to sob. Ferris stepped closer, patting him on the shoulder. Gripping his arms to steady him.

'I beg you pardon, Joshua. But I am half maddened with worry.'

'One question not a hundred, John,' said Brutus. 'There is time for all.'

John nodded. 'You speak truly, my friend. One question it shall be.'

The old man sniffed, wiping his streaming nose on the sleeve of his jacket. John noticed then that there a purple bruise the size of a large apple on the old man's cheek.

'Ask away, Master John, and I will tell all the sorry tale.'

'First, my mother and father. They were not in the house. Where have they gone?'

Lightlantern shook his head. 'Ye know not? Ye saw no man to tell you at the house?'

'No. Are they with friends?'

'No.'

'Then safe beyond the town?'

Three times the servant tried to speak, and each time his emotion was too much for him. Finally he swung away from John's hands and pointed, mutely, up to the top of the hill.

Ferris followed the trembling finger, and then cried out, starting to run up the slope, away from the trees, towards the gibbet.

And the two dangling bodies.

CHAPTER NINE

'Ravens.'

The word broke the stillness between the three men. Standing under the shadow of the gallows.

'Ravens or crows.'

Ferris looked round at the old servant. 'What do you say, Joshua?'

'What's took the eyes. Be either ravens or crows. Likely crows, from yon coppice o'er Vinegar Hill. They likes to find . . .'

'Close your mouth, dotard,' said Brutus York, voice quiet, the menace chilling.

John turned to look at the other two. 'Leave me here, friends. Go back, Brutus, to the house. Joshua, you will come to me after dark, at the house of my parents. There you will tell me all that passed.'

'What will you do, John?' asked the black.

'I shall stay here for a whiles. There is much that clutters my mind. I would have it free 'ere I do anything. Now, I beg you, leave me.'

Lightlantern led the way, old legs nimbly picking their way through the tussocks of long grass, entering the trees with the negro, then scurrying off towards the side of Hertford where he lived. York paused and peered back up the hill, seeing his

friend had not moved at all from his station beneath the gibbet, eyes fixed up at the corpses of his parents.

'I find the need to tell you of it, Brutus,' said John Ferris, when he came back to the devastated house, close to noon. His face was pale, spots of hectic colour on both cheekbones. And there was a tightness to his jaw that Brutus had not seen before. But he seemed calm, almost unnaturally so.

'Sit you down, John. There. I have fashioned a chair from the bits of three others. And found enough wood for a table.'

Ferris eased himself down on the makeshift seat, leaning back against the chipped wall. Looking up at the negro, even managing something that could have passed for a smile.

'Now I know the worst, I can live on. All I must do is seek out the rogues who stole the gold and butchered my mother and my father. Then I can return here and marry my sweet Mary. Aye, it will take time, but I have enough of that.'

'Will you eat?'

'There is food remaining?'

Brutus also smiled. 'I have been about. The backs of these houses. Gardens. Chickens and other animals. I milked some woman's cow. Stole another's chickens. The vegetables from yet another.'

'You were not seen?'

'If I were seen then folk chose to close their eyes. I came to no harm.'

Ferris sighed and shook his head. 'We must be

gone on the morrow. What evils lurks here in the hearts of men and women will turn against us. I shall leave Hertford and never return.'

Brutus went out into the cleaned-up kitchen, returning with a wooden bowl of broth, handing it to John. Squatting cross-legged on the swept floor opposite him. Watching his face as he ate.

'It is good?'

'Aye, truly. I have . . .' He laid down the spoon. 'It was terrible, friend York. They were unclothed and must have been hanged in such a manner. My mother would . . . the shame of that miserable ending! The birds had done well from their faces, but you could still see the fearful beating. My father had burns all across . . . Rope marks about his neck and wrists and body.' With a gesture of dreadful rage he suddenly threw the bowl of stew across the room so that it smashed to shards of splintered wood against the wall. 'By Mary and Joseph, I swear they'll pay! I shall burn the town about their damned ears, Brutus. Every one will die at my hand, I swear it!'

'Did you cut them down, John?' asked the negro, quietly.

'No.'

'You left them hanging?'

Ferris nodded, the red anger seeping from his eyes. 'Nay, friend. Their spirits have long fled those poor mangled corpses. I am no great believer in a hereafter, but if there be one then they are there. There together. And if there is not, then nothing remains to be hurt by those cold chains on that gibbet.'

The blackamoor nodded. 'Truly said, John. Will you have more of . . . Hist!'

'What?'

'Steps. There is someone approaching the house from the back.'

'Joshua?'

Brutus listened intently, head on one side. John also strained his ears but he could hear nothing.

'It is an old man, I think. Stepping light. And alone.'

It was the elderly servant. Cloaked and muffled like some conspirator in a plot against the King. Walking in, then going on through the room without a word, stopping in the narrow, windowless hallway.

'Here, Master John. Where no eyes can see poor old Joshua.'

John and the negro joined him, standing close together, conversing in whispers. The atmosphere of mistrust and fear lay so heavy in the house that John found himself laying a hand on the rounded butt of his pistol, as though even the shadows threatened them.

'Tell me, old friend,' said John. 'I would know all that came to pass.'

'It is a sorry tale, lad. A sorry, sorry tale.'

'Go on.'

'I warned you, Master John. Ye knew there was hatred of Doctor and Mistress Ferris.'

'I did.'

'They sent word out of the town. Sent for strangers to come and put them to question. Folk came the day ye left home for Cambridge.'

'Folk? What manner of folk were they, Joshua?'

'They done called 'emselves witchfinders. Their duty sent by God to seek out evil where 'ere it lay.'

'After my parents? There is madness in the land, Joshua.'

'There were five of 'em. Three bloody demons of gippoes.'

A tiny bell began to ring at the back of John's mind.

'Gippoes, you say?'

The servant nodded. 'Aye. Big, strappin' gippoes. And there was a woman, drove their cart.'

Brutus spoke first. 'I think I have seen them. They passed me, while I lay hiding among the brush. Three men ahorse. The cart and a woman at the reins.'

'A whore,' spat Joshua. 'Evil through and through, with great bubbies as she flaunted at any man cast an eye her way. And there was plenty hereabouts, I tell ye that. And last was . . .'

'A small, neat man. Trim beard. Grey-clad,' exclaimed Ferris. 'God's blood! I too passed them, and even told them the road to Hertford.' There was despair in his voice. 'I could have set a ball to that man's brain and sabred the trull.'

'What was their business?' asked the negro.

Lightlantern looked askance at him, still clearly fearful of the blackness of the man. Hesitating as if he had lost the thread of his reply. Coughing, then trying once more.

'They come as they was called. Folks said that Doctor and Mistress was deep in deviltry. So these here witchfinders come at the fast gallop.'

'Did the neighbours aid these people?' asked John Ferris.

'Nay. Not open, Master John. But it had been their whisperin' as begun the business. Once Mister

Monk and his hellish minions was here, they played the game by their own rules.'

'Was there torture, Master Lightlantern?' asked the negro, leaning patiently in the doorway.

'Much. More than my tongue can . . . my tongue can tell.'

'I will not hear it,' said John.

Brutus York sighed. 'I think that you are wrong in that, friend.'

'I have seen their bodies, damn you!' hissed Ferris, his violent temper flaring uncontrollably. 'I saw the burns and the marks of whips.'

'They swam 'im,' said Joshua. 'Swam the Doctor. Tied 'is thumbs to 'is toes, widdershins, crossed like a fowl for the plucking. Threw him in the river. See if he drowned or swum.'

'He did not drown.'

The old man shook his head vigorously. 'Nay. Had he done that he would have been proven innocent. He fought bitter hard for life, your mother screaming and screaming so's it'd shatter glass.'

'They hanged them both, Joshua,' said John, his rage disappearing as fast as it had risen. 'There on that felon's gibbet.'

'They did. But they suffered sore. They racked them. Kept them sleepless. I fear that Mistress Ferris was sorely used by them gippoes, 'ere she passed over.'

'Enough, Joshua, I beg you. I have heard enough to pursue these witchfinders to the ends of the earth to find them.'

'Does ye know their names, Master John?'

'No.'

'The leader was Monk. Robert Monk. They do

say he be an apostle of that Matthew Hopkins, the general of all witchfinders. His slut was called Lizbeth Hall, or Liza. I forget me. And the gippoes was all brothers. Mendoza by name. I know not their given names.'

'I shall not forget, Joshua. If I had but some silver I would repay you, but the rogues found the strong-box and took all.'

'The inheritance? All?'

'Aye. You did not know of it?'

'Nay. I knew nothing of it.'

'Who broke open the house?' asked the black.

'People.'

'From Hertford?' asked John.

Lightlantern shook his head. 'I cannot say, if ye will pardon me. I cannot . . .'

Ferris nodded. 'But Monk and his minions were there to lead them. And they found the money?'

'Aye. I came after and all were gone and the place were all tatters. Oh, such a day, Master John. Such a day of sadness as I shall never forget.'

He began crying, but refused all comfort, finally pushing his way past the two men and stumbling through the debris and out into the darkness beyond.

The night crept on its heavy feet towards the hour of midnight. Brutus vanished once for nearly an hour, reappearing with a dark green bottle of brandy. John smiled at the sight and never even bothered to ask him where he'd obtained it. After several draws at the fiery liquor he handed the bottle to the negro.

'Now, we must talk, friend.'

Brutus York grinned, his teeth wolfish and bright in the semi-blackness of the parlour. He had tacked up some bedding over the shattered windows, and two candles flickered uncertainly on either side of the room.

'You are to say that we needs must part.'

Ferris gaped in surprise. 'I was, but . . .'

'And that you had offered me hospitality and now all was lost.'

'Aye, yet . . .'

York wagged a finger reprovingly. 'I should offer a great buffet about the chops, John.' His voice was pitched low, yet resonant and filled with a great calmness and strength. 'You were going to tell me that you must pursue a quest against the murderers of your parents and that you could not look for my aid.'

'I was. Mary and Joseph! But if this bastard Monk were here he would call you warlock for such second-seeing. You have read into my mind, Brutus.'

'If those were your thoughts, then they are as false as a woman's heart.'

'I cannot ask you . . .'

'No. Mayhap you cannot *ask*. But I shall be sore offended if you were to ride on the morrow without me at your stirrup. There is a fine gelding only two fields from here that I can ride. A saddle in a barn not a hundred paces off. Let us go together.'

John Ferris rose and the black also stood. With a great cry of friendship they clasped each other around the shoulders, squeezing until muscles cracked, then breaking away and grinning at each other.

'A man could not ask for better company, Brutus York. Then, at dawn we shall ride.'

The horse was easily and quietly stolen, and the negro came looming from the pink dawn, leading it behind him, the hooves clopping softly on the dew-damp grass. He found Ferris inside the cottage, Morgana tethered outside. The air was heavy with the rank scent of lamp-oil.

'John!' he called.

'I am near done.' He held a makeshift torch in his right hand, dripping with pitch. 'A spark to the tinder. Then this place will burn down.' He looked at the black, who felt the cold power in his eyes. 'I would that this damned town had a single throat so that I could slit it at one stroke. I was minded to fire every house about, but I do not blame these poor, misled folk. They were a'feared. But this money-seeking Monk, and his crew of black-hearts . . . They will pay.'

'Where shall we seek them first?'

'We go to Lightlantern's home. He will know which road they set on. And then on to my beloved Mary to break our fast. She must be worried clear from her head at my absence. I should have gone yesterday, but my heart was elsewhere.'

'Is it far?'

'No,' he replied. 'And there is her family to see. The news of what has happened here will have reached their ears and they will be concerned for me. Her father is a hard man, Brutus, but fair and honest. He would have had no part in such deeds.'

Somewhere further along the lane, in the morning's stillness, they both heard the creaking of a door being carefully eased open.

'We should be gone, I think,' whispered the blackamoor. 'I scent rats stirring.'

'At their nests, friend. Hold the mare and I shall set the spark.'

He vanished again through the broken door and the negro heard the unmistakable sound of flint and steel. Almost immediately followed by the crackling of parchment and tinder burning. A thin worm of smoke came coiling lazily into the dawn.

'To horse, Brutus!' called John, coming running through the gathering smoke, holding his sword hilt in his left hand as he came, preventing it from tripping him. He vaulted easily into the saddle and spurred Morgana away from the garden, leaping the hedge in a single bound. Followed by the black on his gelding.

They cantered to the end of the lane and Brutus thought that his friend would leave without a single backward glance, but he did not. Reining in and looking over his shoulder. The thatch was already catching, the fire reaching the timbers through the broken plaster, setting light to the splintered wood within. Smoke was pouring out, rising in the windless sky, higher than the tops of the towering beeches that surrounded the house. Already people were coming from their homes and for a moment Ferris had a wild surge of anger and half-drew his sabre.

But his friend saw the movement and checked him with a word. 'No.'

'Why not? Why in the name of Hell not?' Through gritted teeth.

'Life, dear John, is too short. They do not have one neck. They would likely knock you down with a hurled adze or mallet and you would be dead. And the true villains would live on, scotch-free.'

John nodded. 'Aye. You do well to put that in my mind, Brutus. Let the house go. I shall never return to this town, forsaken of God, again.'

With that he turned his head resolutely away from the crackling inferno and set off towards the home of Joshua Lightlantern, with Brutus York cantering along a few paces at his rear.

'Master John.'

'Joshua?'

'Aye. I saw flames and came through the fields to see if ye needed aid.'

The old man's head was sticking through a gap in the hedge, his hair tousled, still clutching his trusty billhook.

'I fired the house, Joshua.'

'Set light to thine own dwelling? Lord, save us all.'

'The Lord turned his face away from my parents, Joshua, and so I turn my face away from him.'

The old man shook his head sadly. 'I grieve to hear ye speak so, John Ferris. Yet I see your bitterness set upon your brow like the mark of Cain.'

'Cain slew his brother, did he not?' asked Brutus.

'Aye.'

John caught the smell of smoke on the air and realised that it would be as well to move from

Hertford. Bringing the conversation to a speedy ending.

'I shall slay no man, but Monk and his servants. I wish I had silver to give you for your past kindness, Joshua.'

'I did what I did, Master. I loved the Doctor and the Mistress. For old Joshua now there be naught but to creep 'twixt heaven and earth until I am claimed. I wish ye well, John. And to your black companion.'

'One question more. Which road did Monk take?'

'West. Will ye follow him?'

'I will. But first I go to see my dearest Mary.'

The elderly servant stood as though stricken dumb, his billhook falling to the grass.

'What is it, Joshua?'

'Ye do not know.'

'What?'

'Monk and his followers. They took Mistress Mary Villers with 'em. Took her and never seen again.'

CHAPTER TEN

A thread of bright blood trickled down the man's naked body.

He was forty-three years of age, a butcher by trade, and he hailed from the village of Steeple Shuckburgh, some twenty miles south and west of Hertford town. His name was Edric Lockley.

'The pain will stop right soon, Master Lockley, if you do but tell us the names of your familiar spirits and of your fellow witches.'

The voice was quiet, and polite. Through the two days that had passed since Edric came to Watford the voice had scarcely risen above the same passionless tones. The voice could have been asking him about the quality of his stewing mutton, or whether the pork was fresh and tender. It was the voice of an anonymous clerk, checking whether the butcher had paid his dues and taxes correctly.

That was partly the madness.

That such a voice, and such a trim little man, should be at the heart of this appalling torture, surrounded by crazed and demonic servants.

'There will be a fine warm bed for you, and good food. Some of your own best lamb, served so tender that the meat will melt in your mouth.'

'Please,' said Edric Lockley. He tried to say: 'Please', but it was difficult to form words.

A kick from the heavy boots of one of the Mendoza brothers had broken his jaw. A second kick in the mouth, this time from the woman's foot, had snapped off several of his remaining teeth at the level of his gums, so that they pained him almost beyond endurance.

'Please, indeed, Master Lockley. The good folks of Steeple Shuckburgh sent word of your practices. And you came here, to Watford, of your own free will, to prove you were innocent of the charges. Your own free will, Master Lockley, think on't.'

He had thought of it. For every minute of the forty-eight endless hours. Sleepless hours, as the gipsies had taken turn and turn about to make sure that he was not able to sleep. And the thoughts had kept returning that he could have laughed off the trumpery charges. That he should be thought a witch was absurd, yet here he lay, bound and naked, helpless, facing a fearful death.

All for a jest.

It had begun as a jest.

Some year or more back Lockley had employed a yellow, slant-eyed man as an assistant in his slaughterhouse. From far Cathay, he said, and his name had been Ho. No other name but Ho. And he had taught Lockley's wife a sport with a bowl of water, and some words writ down on parchment. And a small lodestone that floated on wood in the water. You laid out the words around the bowl, each offering some sort of foolish fortune. 'A trip is to come.' 'A fair lover will see you on a Sunday.' 'Crops will be fine this year.' Silly, idle things. He

had played it as well, and so had many of the women of Steeple Shuckburgh.

It had been a merry time, sitting around and watching the dull grey stone as it turned and bobbed, until it settled towards a fortune for the chosen one.

'Meg Inchton,' he whispered, so softly that Robert Monk did not catch the words.

It had begun with Meg Inchton. A pretty, open lass, with hair the colour of summer wheat. Edric himself had been one of the locals who had tumbled her in the hay, but she had married and was with child. The fortune had pointed to one of the less happy ones that Edric's wife had put in to liven the sport. It said: 'The fruit will wither on the bough.' It had meant no harm.

'Meant no harm,' mumbled Lockley, tasting his own salt blood fresh on his tongue.

'If you mumble so, Master Edric, then we can hardly prove you guiltless,' smiled Monk, standing close to the wretched prisoner.

'If you care for it, Master,' suggested Liza Hall, 'I can loosen that stubborn tongue within the hour. Go and sup, and then send Daniel Mendoza to me. I swear that this bonny fellow will be singin' like a fine lark, 'ere you come back.'

'Don't leave me with her,' begged Edric. The beating and brutality of the gipsies had been bad enough, but the sly torturing of the slatternly woman was worse. They struck at the core of his being. At his manhood, his pride.

'The fruit will wither on the bough.'

Two days later Meg Inchton had clutched at her belly screaming with pain. By the next day she

had miscarried, the bloody rags of flesh that she produced bearing little resemblance to a human child, armless and with only paddles of skin where its legs should have been.

If they had stopped then . . .

But the game had continued, and more of the foolish predictions seemed to come true.

'Beware the water crossing.'

And Josiah Turnling's only daughter found drowned in the mill-pond a week later.

Edric's wife had tried to lighten things, taking out any prediction that seemed threatening.

'A gold harvest to overflow.' That had been her own one.

'Poor Portia,' he said, his voice drowned by the sound of the door closing on the cell as Monk slammed it firmly shut.

A golden harvest.

Portia Lockley had been dozing beneath a cart loaded to overflowing with golden corn, harvested that day. An axle had unaccountably snapped and the cart had dropped across her back, splintering her spine and killing her instantly.

That had been last year.

But things had gone on, the whispering and the pointing fingers. Until he could take no more of it. When he had heard that Robert Monk, the Witch-finder, was in the district, carrying out an inquisition at Watford, Edric had mounted his dappled mare, Bess, and ridden to see him. To show the world he had no fear.

'Sweet Jesus,' he cried, finding himself starting to weep again.

'Cry to the Saviour, do you, deary?' sneered the

woman. Raising a hand the size of a hock of ham, and wiping it across her mouth. 'Thought Satan was more to your liking.'

'I'm no witch,' he protested.

'Not what folks say, deary. Still, truth will out. Time you and me talked privy like.'

'No,' he said. 'No.' But the word scarcely reached his lips, dying. His mouth opening in a silent scream of agony as she took his genitals in her strong fingers and pinched them, twisting savagely so that a merciful blackness swallowed him.

He blinked open, wondering what the loud noise was. Realising that it was his own face being slapped to and fro. To and fro. Liza Hall was squatting astride his chest, her weight bearing down on him, thighs spread so that he could see she wore nothing beneath her torn and dirty linen shift.

'You come of your own will, didn't you?' she said, grinning through the gaps in her stained teeth, punctuating her words with slaps so hard they rattled his brain inside his skull.

It was woefully true.

Squire Webb, a jovial, bluff giant of a man, owned much of the land about Steeple Shuckburgh. He had called for the butcher, offering him a glass of cordial, setting him at his ease before delivering the petard. Telling him that the villagers suspected him of witchcraft. Lockley had not been too surprised, but it had been a grievous shock hearing the Squire put it in such a formal manner.

Then he had heard that the witchfinders were in

Watford and he had set out immediately, leaving word for Squire Webb that he was off to clear his good name.

Could that only have been two short days back?

Two days . . .

'Don't go fallin' asleep when a lady's talkin' to you my sweet coz,' she said, pinching the lobe of his ear to bring him back to consciousness. Pinching so hard that he could feel warm blood on his naked shoulder.

'I need food and drink, or I shall surely die,' he stammered.

'And I need a good fuck, but not from a weasel cock like you,' she laughed, reaching behind her to feel him. 'Though with some brandy I might yet raise you to a goodly length,' laughing again.

'I am sore tired.'

The gipsies had run him for the better part of a whole day and a night. Until the soles of his feet were bruised and bleeding and he wept at each step. Each time he fell and tried to rest they would kick him. One of them, Daniel, he thought the name, had unlaced his breeches and urinated in his face to rouse him, bellowing his laughter as the butcher spluttered and coughed.

'Then tell us, my chicken. Tell us how you feed your imps. And tell us names of more of your coven and how you do your evil.'

She shuffled forwards a little on his chest, her hand still holding him. Starting to rub at him, fondling him. To his own horror he found that he was beginning to feel arousal at her skill.

'Leave me be, whore,' he said, lisping through his broken teeth.

'I'll leave you, little man,' grinned Liza Hall. 'But that tongue of yourn be right evil. Happen it could find a better use than slandering an innocent woman like me.'

He could hardly breathe with her weight on him. The ropes around his wrists and ankles were so tight that black blood was seeping from around his torn nails. The constant accusations from Monk and the brutality from the three men and the woman were all taking a toll on his brain. The words of Robert Monk kept insinuating themselves into his mind. All he had to do was make up a story for them. Then he could rest. Have some food. Warm broth and ale. A bed to ease his aches and balm for his cuts and wounds. He could sleep. All he had to do was . . .

'Tell us of your practices, butcher-man,' hissed Liza, laying herself full length on top of him, her breath foul in his face. She kissed him, softly, on the cheek, her lips moving to his swollen mouth. Her tongue between his lips, flickering like a serpent's tongue. Pressing down, near choking him.

'Tell us, laddy. Tell Liza, and I'll be so good to you. I'll pleasure you. Better me ridin' you than them gippoes rogerin' you up the arse with their great cocks. They've done that. Split a man's fundament at Saffron Walden while puttin' him to the question. So much blood, and him screamin' and screamin'. Better me than that, eh, Edric?'

He blinked, trying to stop himself from crying. It hadn't seemed such a foolish idea when he'd ridden in, free as the westerly wind, asking to see the

witchfinder. Now he was tortured, his mind barely holding on to sanity.

'If I tell, will I be spared?' he asked.

The woman sat back, again. Patting him lovingly on the cheek. Making him wince more than when she'd been slapping him. 'Course, Edric. He'll spare you the horrors of the fire, and that's my oath on it. No drowning for you if you pour out the milk for us. No scorched skin and seared flesh. I'll see you're spared that.'

'If I be spared, then . . .' he began.

'And I'll give you some fuckin' like your barren shrew of a wife never done. Would you like to graze on my bubbies, Edric? Should I lace open my bodice for you to see 'em and nuzzle 'em? I'll let you.'

If he was to be spared, then it would be well to keep the right side of this voracious and brutal woman. He nodded.

Liza opened her legs wider, her fingers drifting down, over her belly, under the skirt and shift. He watched, like a rabbit before a viper, as she touched herself, hand rubbing at the matted, wiry hair. Her fingers disappeared into the red-lipped slit, coming out slick with moisture. She offered them to him, pressing her hand against his mouth, so that he could smell and taste her arousal.

'There, mannikin. Wet the deck and pass it round, eh? Mayhap that wicked witch's tongue of yourn can be made use of. Here . . .'

With a struggle, nearly falling off the blood-stained table as she did it, the woman managed to turn herself around, presenting the gleaming half-moons of her buttocks, close to his face. She drop-

ped her head, licking at him, warming him with her mouth. Rousing him to full erection, despite his loathing for her.

Finally the ultimate horror. She eased herself back, sitting down on him, so that his face and nose and mouth were crushed between her buttocks. He fought and wriggled, trying to breathe, nearly vomiting at the stench of her dirty flesh.

'Get your tongue well in, there, boy. Use it well,' she sighed, 'and you'll be spared the fire and the water. Spared it. Ah, that be it . . .'

Robert Monk stood in the centre of the narrow court-room, glancing across its dim length at the two magistrates who sat behind a high table. Seeing that he still had their fascinated attention, he carried on reading from the document in his hand.

'That is the burden of the confession. That the said Edric Lockley, butcher of Steeple Shuckburgh, confesses his sins as manifold. He has sold his soul to Satan, his lord and master. As did his wife before him, though she was taken by a wicked sprite. Lockley further admits his carnal knowledge with various sprites, and committing sodomy with his familiar imp, called Belzeal. He described, as you may recall, the great cold and immense size of Belzeal's member and the pain of its penetration.'

The magistrates looked across at this monster of corruption. He was dressed in a ragged shirt and torn breeches, slumped in chains. Held upright by two of the Witchfinder's Romany followers. One of them caught the eye of the magistrates and straightened himself, barely stifling a belch.

Monk laid down one sheet of the indictment on the bench in front of him, picking up another and scanning it rapidly. Resuming in his dust-dry voice, measuring out the evidence carefully, picking out the parts that he knew were the most damning. Despite the most careful search, they had failed to find any bodily imperfection that they could reasonably claim to be a witch's teat, for suckling a familiar. So the man's own confession was vital.

'Recall, my lords, that this man came forth to us of his own will. This was his master of darkness testing us. Testing me, yourselves, all of us.' That was something else that Matthew Hopkins had taught Monk. If there was a potential weakness in your case, bring it out yourself. Mock it and use it, so that the accused can find little benefit from it.

'He has named in this paper several familiars who supped food and milk from his mouth.' There; that was a cunning way around it. Liza Hall had thought that up and Monk vowed privately to reward her with an extra guinea.

'Their names are Lob-by-the-fire, Andreanna, Cheat'em-all, Spur-flank and Rip-pocket. Respectively a ferret, a white cat invisible in daylight, a fox that spoke in an ancient tongue to him and a leopard with a human face in each spot.'

'That is four, Master Monk,' interrupted the senior of the magistrates. A local land-owner of considerable wealth and influence, who held men like the witchfinder in contempt for their evil work. Yet who also realised only too well that the common people needed their trials and their persecutions to keep their minds off the sorry state the land was in during the War.

'My lord?' queried Monk, politely, raising an eyebrow.

'Four described, and five named. What of the fifth? Rip-breeches or some such foolery.' Laughing at his own jest.

'There are those, my lord, who would not find witchcraft a matter for jesting. Those in power in this land who would wonder at those who mocked the work of seeking out evil.'

It was a clear threat and the magistrate's cheeks flushed purple, his small eyes almost vanishing behind rolls of fat. But he had sense enough to know that it would not be wise to make an enemy of a man like this Robert Monk. The fever to find out witches was sweeping the east of the country, with dozens being tried at a single assize. Not even Hopkins had dared point a finger at a member of the nobility, but already a priest had been accused and executed.

'I beg you pardon, Master Monk.'

'And I do accept that, my lord. The fifth of the creatures you spoke of is a familiar demon with the body of a young girl and the head of a phoenix. It was used by Lockley in witching the miller whose house was burned down in the dead of night.'

'I recall it.'

Monk nodded. Smiling inwardly at how easy it was to browbeat these local gentry with their fine words and their private terrors.

'I will not list again the sorry saga of this man's enchantments. We have heard them well enough. And the list of his accomplices, who will be questioned in the days to come.' He laid the parchment down on the bench with a dramatic gesture. 'I think

that there is no more to be said.'

The two magistrates looked at each other, nodding their agreement. One stared at the wretched butcher in the dock.

'Edric Lockley, you have heard your confession of the evil witchcraft that you and your miserable coven have worked at. Is there anything you wish to say before we pass sentence on you?'

There was no answer. Daniel Mendoza nudged the prisoner so hard in the ribs that he staggered and nearly fell. The local landowner repeated the question to him, and Lockley raised dull eyes.

'I am to be spared. I was told. Spared.'

'Spared? Master Monk, what does he say? Has this confession been falsely got?'

The witchfinder was already on his feet, the words coming butter-smooth to his lips. 'He was offered the mercy of avoiding the death of fire or water, my lord. If he gave us his fellow conspirators in deviltry, and he did so.'

'Ah, then we can indeed spare you that, Lockley. It is the sentence of the court that . . .'

The words droned on, but the butcher seemed to be no longer listening. There was a vacant smile pasted on his face and he was watching a large fly, buzzing sleepily in a shaft of spring sunlight. He had been promised that he would be spared. Liza had promised him. He had happily said anything they wanted, and that was all that mattered.

'Spared,' he whispered, as they took him down the steps towards the cell again.

Robert Monk went cheerfully to his inn that night, the pocket of his broadcloth coat weighed down

with a chinking bag of silver. It would be added to that blessed windfall from Hertford. If this went on long he could become a truly rich man.

And there was company waiting for him in the inn, to go with the wine and the meat. Company that showed Liza Hall for the wanton drab that she was. Even though she had done good work with the wretched Lockley, that had to be admitted. As well as drinking deep of her own perverse pleasures.

But what was waiting was different. Gold, rather than pinchbeck. A diamond, not dull glass.

Robert Monk laughed out loud.

For him, life was becoming better than he had ever dreamed.

He was still laughing to himself as he entered the room he had reserved. With its huge canopied double bed. And its reward for him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

It was better than a month later that two men came riding into Watford from the north.

One sat easily on a raw-boned bay mare, with a cavalry sword at his left hip and a pistol holstered on the right. He was accompanied by a tall negro, whose colouring attracted a deal of sidelong glances and sent mothers scurrying to bring in their infants from playing around the pump. Both men were dusty and travel-stained, hardly bothering to look away from the road. Only pausing when they reached the first inn, 'The Branch And Tabard'.

John Ferris swung down, handing the reins to Brutus, stopping a young man who was striding busily by.

'Pardon, friend.'

'Aye?' looking curiously at the black on the gelding. Eyes blinking nervously.

'We heard of a witch-hanging hereabouts.'

The eyes brightened and the mouth split into a great smile. Revealing the lad had but one tooth in his whole jaw, and that set plumb-centre in the top.

'There was first one man. Called Loxley, or some such. A butcher as rode here without being bid, from a village many miles off.'

'Steeple Shuckburgh?' called York.

'That be the place, Master. And he was tested and hanged within three days. His body dangles first in line on the gallows that lies . . .'

'We saw it,' interrupted John. 'And eight others beside it.'

'A mighty coven, so he said it was.'

'He?'

The grin grew yet more broad, until it threatened to split the fellow's face clean in half.

'The one they calls "Witchfinder". I brought him ale one evening.'

'His name?'

'Monk. Robert Monk.'

Ferris turned to Brutus. 'The word was right, friend. Monk has been here.'

'And right well did he do. Uncovering such a nest of evil as you'd not dream of.'

'The bodies were all of old women,' said John.

'A witch is often old, so 'tis said.'

'Old, poor and helpless, 'tis often said, also,' mocked Ferris. 'Some lackbrain creature who has made an enemy and knows it not.'

'Best not talk that way, Master, whosoever ye be. Not here in Watford. Less some tongue sets your name wingin' after Master Monk.'

Ferris looked quickly around, seeing that the road was deserted. Drawing his dagger, gripping it by the horn hilt. His left hand grabbing at the other's collar and holding him against the wall, the point of the blade squeezing against and through the skin of the throat. Altering the position of the knife so that the tip pressed within the man's nostril.

'Mary and Joseph, dog!' he hissed, feeling the red

mists of anger drifting across his mind. 'I vow 'twas curs like you set this bastard Monk upon my own parents and caused their doom.'

'I did . . . did not mean . . .' stammered the young man, reaching up on the tips of his toes to try and keep the knife from cutting him. But a thread of blood dribbled bright across his trembling lips.

'He was with three gipsies, and a slut.'

'Aye.'

'And another person.'

'A young girl, called Mary.'

The knife slipped in another half inch making him whimper with pain and terror.

'Sully not her name with your tongue, you offal! She was with him when they left?'

'Aye.'

He turned once more to face the negro. 'He has some hold upon her. Perhaps he has threatened her parents with trial if she does not stay with him.'

Brutus York nodded his agreement. 'Some device like that, John, I'll be bound. But come. We must be on the road. Leave this wretch.'

'He went where?'

'I heard . . . heard . . . Lord 'a mercy, but you will split me.'

'Where did Monk go?'

'South. I heard him say he was minded to move beyond London.'

'Then it's south for us, Brutus.'

The negro sighed. 'Aye, south it is, friend.'

Ferris turned to look at him, still gripping the man tightly. 'What ails you, Brutus?'

'We have been about this business long weeks, John, and I weary of it.'

'Then go and be damned to you!' he shouted. Jamming the point of the dagger in as far as it would go, then using the razored edge to draw it outwards. Cutting a great gash the entire length of the fellow's nose, opening it like an axe through butter.

Blood gushed out in a mighty flood, soaking the man's mouth, running in gouts across his jerkin, splashing on Ferris's coat and breeches. There was the beginnings of a scream that died still-born as John kneed him hard in the groin, feeling his knee grate against the edge of the pubic bone.

'That for your damned Monk,' he hissed, kicking the writhing man in the ribs, then turning and snatching the reins from Brutus.

It was two hours before either of them spoke, and they were nine miles away from Watford by then. The blackamoor suddenly reined in his horse and held his great hand out towards John.

'This is farewell.'

'How so?'

Brutus shook his head. 'It grieves me to sever a friendship of which I had great hopes. A friendship that was like no other between myself and a white man.'

'Then why?' But the question lacked conviction, and Ferris knew it.

'I think I need not say.'

'No, Brutus. It is because you no longer wish to follow my quest.'

'The road of vengeance is indeed long.'

'But I have heard that revenge is a dish that is best when tasted cold,' replied John.

'Aye. If ever that dish comes to your table. We have followed Monk for long weeks; always he takes some twisting turn that allows him to 'scape us.'

'I do not wish him to know he is pursued. Only now did I ask in such a way. If word reached him then he will be on his guard.'

'I know that, friend. But we live from hand to mouth, our bellies scraping at our backbones. I needs must do more. I am sorry.'

Only then did the tall negro reach out again with his own hand and clasp that of John Ferris. Pressing it in a firm grip, smiling ruefully at him.

'I shall miss you sorely, Brutus York,' said the Englishman.

'And I you.'

'The road will be longer, the days more wearisome. I wish you well.'

'And bear no grudge?'

'I could as well bear a grudge against my dear Mary, friend.'

'May all the gods look down and speed your quest to slay the wicked Monk and release your lady from her vile durance with him,' said the negro, solemnly.

'I thank you. But where will you go?'

'There is a travelling fair that comes to these parts, through Blackfriars, during the summer. I know I can find work there.'

'To Blackfriars?'

'Aye. It moves about London and the villages about until September. So, if you need my aid,

John, then send me word. I shall come.'

Ferris felt a lump in his throat at the total honesty and friendship of the negro. Reaching out to clasp his hand a second and final time.

'If I find Monk I shall do what I can against him. But if the cards fall ill on the table, then I shall speed my cry to you. I shall miss you, Brutus York.'

The blackamoor released his hand and turned the horse's head towards a fork in the road that led back southerly and east, towards the far distant haze of smoke that was London.

Ferris watched him go, feeling more alone at that moment than at any time in his life.

Monk had ridden further west than he had first intended, lured by word of a coven of witches in the direction of Oxford. But after two days he changed his mind and started to cut southwards, as he had originally wished to do. There had been constant whispers of evil on the coast, not far from Romney, on the edge of the marshes. There was even a letter in his saddle-bag from a Romney magistrate asking his aid.

It chanced that the paths of the two men were gradually converging. John Ferris, with revenge hunched on his shoulders, moving towards London from the north. Robert Monk travelling easily in from the north-west. It was only a matter of time before their paths were to cross.

CHAPTER TWELVE

First, there was a chance meeting of some old companions. John had spurred on after losing the company of the blackamoor, finding no pleasure in the warmth of the early summer sun, no delight in a mug of good ale beneath a spreading oak on some village green.

The desire for vengeance pressed him on, hag-ridden, so that his waking hours were filled only with the cold iron taste of it. And his sleeping hours were haunted by leering demons. Though he had barely seen the face of Robert Monk, he had built up a picture in his mind of a grey-suited, anonymous man, neat and clerkly, low-spoken. Three hulking gipsies ranged about him, with black hair, curling over their ringed ears. And a middle-aged woman, whose face he recalled better than the others. They came in the small hours of the night when the breath eases and the blood flows at its slowest. Always the same dream. He was running, yet his boots seemed filled with lead, and the five of them were walking away from him. Along a dusty corridor in some huge, nameless mansion, the walls lined with stained suits of archaic armour. And as they walked easily from him, there was always Mary Villers, her face tormented by some

hideous torture, tears streaking her pretty cheeks. Monk and the devils laughed, their voices echoing along the corridor, and then . . . then John would wake, soaked through with sweat.

His road led him into a small hamlet. Only a dozen or so tiny cottages, leaning against each other as though they needed support. A brace of ale-houses and a decrepit Saxon church, its tower in sad need of renovation. There was a pond, coated with green slime, lacking the presence of even a single duck or goose.

There were three men seated around a table, outside the first of the alehouses, their backs towards him. All three seemed sturdy, and for a moment Ferris' heart leaped beneath his coat at the thought that they might be the Mendoza brothers. He reined in Morgana, reaching to make sure that pistol and sword were both ready to hand.

Then he cantered on a few more yards, the mare's hooves clattering on the stone of the road around the green. All three men swung around at the noise.

'Captain Ferris!' called the nearest. 'See, lads, but 'tis the good Captain himself, come to call us back to the fighting!'

'You're . . . Ford. Cornet Ford. And you are Trooper Hathaway and you are . . .?' the name escaped him.

'Hawks, Captain. Trooper Hawks. As was, if you take my meanin', Captain.'

He swung down from Morgana, tethering her to a broken bench, calling inside for ale. Though the

truth was that he had barely eightpence to his name. The road of revenge was not just long. It was also exceedingly penurious, and he could not blame Brutus York for taking the road that he had chosen.

The others shuffled up to make room for him, all grinning and nudging each other nervously. Finding the sudden appearance of the man who had commanded them only months earlier difficult to take.

The ale arrived, served by a surly man, balding, with an apron that seemed held together only with dried blood and grease. John supped deep at it, washing all the road dirt from his throat. Giving the trio time to adjust to his presence. Eying them over the top of his mug of thin and bitter beer.

Ford. Tall, lean, with prematurely white hair. Hawks, missing an eye. It had been put out by a pikeman from Norwich in a brawl about the fires one night. And Hathaway, oldest of the three. A man whose love of ale would have always prevented him from rising any higher in the ranks than common soldier. But all good fellows, and it lifted his heart to meet up with them.

The tension eased and they were soon talking together as all soldiers will. Of bitter clashes of arms, and sturdy foes. Of ambushes and charges. Of misfires and lucky blows. Scars earned and given in a score of engagements, major and minor, during the early part of the great Civil War.

They told him how they had been lucky enough to take some rich booty. Part of some Royalist family's treasure. They had used their share to buy themselves out of the New Model Army, deciding

that it was better to be a hungry civilian than a dead soldier.

'But we have precious little left of that booty, Captain,' grinned Hawks.

'Captain no longer. Plain John Ferris and that is all. Where has your silver gone?'

Ford called for more ale, turning back to face him. 'Too much of this drinking, Cap . . . Master Ferris. And there was some rogues with dice that performed for them and not for us.'

Hathaway interrupted. 'We were to teach them a lesson. Give them a spanking, Master.'

Hawk finished the story. 'And found that their leader was cousin to the mayor of the city. It took more money to free ourselves from that.'

'And there have been women, Master Ferris,' said Ford, winking. 'Trulls with bodies of fire and hearts of beaten brass, and that's the truth of it.'

'So now?'

'Now we are to London and earn ourselves a fortune. They say the streets are paved with golden blocks, Master Ferris?'

He considered the question carefully. 'I think that the roads there are lined with cut-purses and stranglers who would take your last farthing and spit in your eye.'

'But we still must try it,' smiled Hawks, his enthusiasm not one whit diminished. 'For you are on the road, and mayhap we could travel together?'

'Aye, Master, ride with us,' chorussed the other two.

He shook his head. 'I am about a special business and I fear . . .'

'For Parliament?' asked Hathaway. 'Then let us be your guards, Captain?'

Suddenly John realised what a tempting offer that was. Now, without York, he was an outsider. A man alone. But with three battle-toughened veterans at his back, he could take on all the witchfinders in the realm, and their gipsy bullies as well.

'I have no money, friends,' he shrugged.

'Oh, Mary's arse and teats! Would that stand 'twixt us and your leadership, Captain?' called Ford, banging his pot on the scarred table with such vigour that it shattered into a dozen pieces. 'We shall ride. But first we will eat here and you shall be our guest, Captain. And there you shall tell us all of your mission.'

He told them everything.

Near everything.

Good men though he knew them to be, Ferris had seen enough of peasants confronted with the chances of wealth. The idea that he was pursuing a thousand guineas would mean more to them than his desperate, overwhelming desire to free his Mary and wed her.

He told them of the cruel ending of his parents, touching briefly on his friendship with the black. The landlord of the alehouse brightened when he realised that the three soldiers had a little money in their purses. But the food that he brought them was still of the poorest quality.

'At least he has not ruined fine meat with bad cookin',' jested Hathaway.

Hawks squinted through his one good eye at a crock of buttered parsnips, prodding at one with his knife. 'I swear that a cuirass of this greasy dung would turn the sharpest lance.'

But it was hot and ample. Not for the first time Ferris wondered whether he had been pursuing his mission with too great a caution. Fearing to set Monk on his guard and thereby risk Mary's life, he had moved slowly, never drawing attention to himself. Gradually closing in his net on the Witchfinder. Nearer and nearer.

Now, with three more swords at his command, it could be the time for the charge, rather than the careful stalking.

As they sat over the remnants of some stale cheese and a dish of wrinkled apples he finished his story. Sitting back and stretching. Wondering whether they would nibble at his bait and join him. He had hinted about Monk having some silver that would be theirs if they were to help him seek out and destroy his quarry.

'And ye'll kill this Monk?' asked Ford, his voice louder than John would have wished for discretion. But they had drunk the better part of four gallons of ale.

'I will do what I can,' he replied.

'And if there be silver, it shall be shared among us?' tried Hathaway.

'If he has aught of mine, then I shall share it with you all. Anything he has that is not mine shall be shared totally among you. I will have none of it. What say you friends?'

There was a moment of silence. Ferris thought that he caught a glimpse of a blurred face peering

through the crack of the door to the kitchen, but it disappeared and he decided that it must have been a trick of the light in the shadowy room.

His concern vanished as all three men exchanged a brief glance. A nod. And then a bellow of their support for him.

'And damnation to the fuckin' witchfinder, Robert Monk!! May he rot in Hell with all the witches he's burned and hanged!!' Hawks' face was flushed with his enthusiasm, his patch pushed back on his forehead, showing the weeping, puckered socket beneath.

Ferris relaxed. Soon, now.

Soon.

While the four men slept, together in the single room that the village alehouse boasted, the landlord crept from the back door. Silently saddling his old cob, and riding away into the night.

Carrying a message that he guessed might be worth a golden guinea or two, if delivered into the right hands.

Robert Monk carefully unlaced a purse and counted five pounds into the man's hand. Feeling it money well spent. The news wasn't particularly surprising.

All that surprised him was that John Ferris had taken so long in the chase.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Liza Hall scratched irritably at her groin, fingers burrowing busily between her thighs. Finally exclaiming with pleasure as she found what she wanted. Using her nail to lift the tiny louse from her unwashed skin, popping it triumphantly between finger and thumb. Licking the blood off herself.

She was in an ill-temper, having been told by Abe Mendoza, oldest of the three brothers, that the current catch of suspected witches contained not a single man. Liza found some pleasure in hurting helpless women, but it was nothing compared with the sensual delight of having a bound and naked male on whom she could practice her foul and perverse crafts.

Not even buying drink for the trio of gipsies so that they all shared her bed that previous night had done more than take the top edge off her anger.

The Mendozas were all sleeping in the loft of the barn, adjacent to the inn. None of them cared over much for bedding down beneath a proper roof, preferring somewhere more open. Life with Robert Monk was proving much to all their liking, with ample coppers for ale and food, and the opportunity for a rare respectability as the helpers of an

eminent Witchfinder. A man who was already being spoken of in the same breath as Matthew Hopkins himself.

Monk himself had been woken early. A gentle rapping at the door of his room, and a figure appearing, shadowy behind a shielded candle. Outside he could see that it was still full dark, and that the wind was rising.

It had been the landlord, flustered at having to disturb such an important guest. Constantly bowing and hissing and whispering so that it was some time before Monk realised that the man was saying there was a messenger beneath with news of great importance.

Tucking his embroidered night-shirt about his shrunk shanks, Monk padded across the cold floor of the room, turning for a last glance at the warmth of his bed.

Once he heard the message, he went straight back to his room. Intent on dressing and rousing the Mendozas. But he seemed little disturbed by it, even whistling a jaunty tune to himself, turning to smile again at his double bed, and at the figure hunched beneath the covers.

'Captain John Ferris from Hertford,' he said quietly to himself. 'At last.'

The three ex-soldiers took it in turn to ride ahead as scouts, going into each hamlet and asking for news of the Witchfinder and his crew. It wasn't difficult.

Within three days they had closed the gap so

that they were only scant hours behind. Hawks had gone first, coming back at a gallop.

'They say he's bound for the coast, Captain.'

Ferris had tried several times to persuade them to cease using his military title, but they seemed happier with it and he now let it lie.

'Where?'

'Romney they say. There's witchery in the Cinque Ports and he goes there to burn it out.'

Ferris nodded. The trail had been long, but at last it was nearing its end. 'Where does he sleep this night?'

'Next place is called Steepleford. That's where he was for breaking his noon fast this very day.'

Ferris looked at the sun, coasting serenely through a calm sky with only a scattering of round, white clouds scudding high above their heads. A hawk circled slowly, riding a current of warm air, wings spread in effortless flight.

'It will be dark in four or five hours. I fear me that Morgana's cast shoe is worsening. She favours that right rear leg. How far then to this next village?'

Hawks sniffed. Wiping his hand across his sweating forehead, easing the narrow cord that held the patch over his eye. 'Steepleford is an hour. There is a smithy there. And then they say that where Monk sleeps is called Cold Easter. Another three hours off.'

'We should come at them at dawn, while they sleep,' suggested Ferris. 'Seek out where they rest. The inn. And then come upon them.'

'Butcher them in their beds, Captain,' said Ford, grinning wolfishly at the thought of an easy slaughter.

'We must look out for Mistress Mary, men. Take

the brothers at will. But spare me Monk. Mary and Joseph, but that man is mine!'

Steepleford was a tumbledown hamlet and it took a mixture of bribery and threats to persuade the blacksmith to rouse himself and get his fire burning. Ferris hissed impatiently through his teeth as he realised that the shoeing of the mare was likely to take well towards dark, allowing for the time for the charcoal to heat properly.

'Let us go on, Captain,' suggested Hathaway. 'We can spy out the land and meet you at some place.'

'Perhaps.' Tapping the smith on his shoulder. 'Is there a good meeting-place 'twixt here and Cold Easter?'

'There be a ruined mansion. A mile this side of Cold Easter. Men say it was once home to a lady-in-waiting to the Virgin Queen herself. Lays back on the right, in a grove of withies, near a pond.'

Ferris nodded. 'Then it will be there. I will eat here, and be with you before midnight. Let one of you seek out our prey.'

The three men looked at each other. 'Aye, Captain,' replied Hawks. 'Then all will be ready for the trap to spring at dawn.'

The blacksmith had been drinking heavily before noon and was slow and careless. Once Morgana screamed in pain as he brushed a red-hot length of iron against her flank and it took all of Ferris' strength to hold her and prevent her from killing the clumsy fool.

Even with John's help it was nearly three hours before the arduous labouring was completed. The man's wife brought out some fresh bread and sliced mutton, cold and tasty, washed down with good spring water. Dusk was riding in from the rolling hills to the west when he finally set out again after his three friends.

Ford had killed a goat.

As they walked their horses along the ill-kept path, between high hedges, all three men heard what sounded to them like the distant beating of a slack-skinned drum. Sonorous and hollow. But it faded and finally died away altogether.

It was a short while after that they heard the faint tinkling of a bell, and round a corner of the lane came a large white goat, dragging a chain and a round-ended stake behind it. Around its shaggy neck was a tin bell.

'Hold my horse,' Ford said, swinging from the saddle, hand on his sabre. It was a similar weapon to that carried by Ferris. With a slightly-curving blade, sharp-tipped, brass-hilted. As the goat came closer Ford drew it from the scabbard in a whisper of steel. Hefting it up to his left shoulder, ready for the back-handed cut.

The sabre hissing down in a clean arc, slicing through the animal's neck in one blow. As the head dropped the bell came loose and rolled in the dirt by Ford's feet.

'Meat for tonight,' he grinned. 'Better eatin' than the Captain, I'll warrant.'

* * *

The fire crackled merrily, casting a bright glow across the clearing. Evening had slipped into night, and the land was quiet. When the men arrived at the agreed meeting-place the small lake had been seething with life, frogs croaking, ducks settling for their sleep. Now all was still.

The ruined house was settled in a pile of its own bricks, low in a hollow, like a dead nun, the moonlight black and white over its angles and shadows. The willows were ranged all along the margin of the water, the light breeze setting their feathery branches rustling and rubbing against each other.

Ford was sleeping, wrapped in a long brown blanket, mouth open, snoring. Twitching occasionally as some dream seized him. Hawks was in charge of the cooking, sitting on his haunches by the fire, turning the meat on the makeshift spit, licking his fingers as the fat crackled out and bubbled from the goat's flesh. It had been a long time since he had eaten goat and he could almost taste the delicate flavour.

His mouth watered.

Hathaway had offered to go scouting, leaving them on foot a half hour earlier. Heading towards the village of Cold Easter, picking his way carefully through the marshy surround to the lake.

They expected him back in a couple of hours.

By then the meat should be well cooked and ready for gnawing.

Hathaway was proud of his skill at tracking. He paused as he caught a glimpse of the flickering lights of the first of the cottages in the village. Licking his lips and wondering whether he'd dare to go in and

order himself a mug of ale before carrying out the rest of his mission. As a veteran soldier he knew only too well that ale clouded his judgement. And with friends depending on him, he didn't want to find himself suddenly in the situation of discovering that his one mug of beer had mysteriously become a dozen, and that his legs would not support him and he was on his back gazing up at the moon.

Hathaway didn't want that at all.

John Ferris had slowed Morgana to a walk soon after leaving Steepleford. A canter along the moonlit lane and then a swift gallop, just to check the shoe was properly fitted. Then to a walk. The tracks were deeply rutted by cart-wheels and there was no point in risking the mare with a bad tumble in the night.

The three Troopers would wait for him. He trusted them that much. And he also knew that they would have the news of Monk's whereabouts.

'Robert Monk,' he said, tasting the syllables. 'Monk.' He could almost feel his blade sliding through the Witchfinder's belly, so often had he imagined the scene. And within the space of this night, it would all come to pass.

Ford had taken over charge of the roasted goat, while Hawks slept. The fire had sunk lower and the ex-soldier threw on a little more of the dry wood that they'd collected at dusk. Looking up through the dome of trees to try and make out where the moon lay.

'Late. Hathaway will be here soon. Less he has

yielded to temptation and gone to the alehouse. If he has I'll slit his bastard's gizzard!'

Hathaway had managed to creep in easily, unseen, picking his way through the dry summer grass, snaking in and out of the low fences that straggled along the rear of the cottages. The inn was furthest down the street, and he reached its neat garden. Pausing before stepping quietly in towards the cluster of outbuildings in its yard. The moon came and went.

John Ferris felt the tension easing from him as the moment for action grew nearer. His temper cooling as he readied himself for the brief combat that would cleanse his memory of his parents' butchery.

'Henry. That you, Henry?'

Ford peered into the shifting ripples of darkness beneath the willows. With the gentle wind still blowing it was hard to hear anyone approaching, but he was sure he'd heard the brittle crack of a branch snapping beneath someone's weight.

'Hathaway! Come on, man. Captain'll be here right soon.'

Hawks stirred in his sleep, muttering something inaudible, then rolling himself back into his blanket, his hands between his thighs for warmth.

The goat was well cooked, the fire sunk lower, casting less light.

'Hathaway!' called Ford again.

Ferris had stopped and tethered Morgana to a sapling. The mare standing patiently by while he unlaced his breeches and relieved himself. That done he climbed again on her back and heeled her forwards. Keeping his eyes open for a sign of the ruined building that the blacksmith had mentioned to them.

It must have been after midnight before he finally saw it, set off the road, near the glittering sheen of a small lake.

He caught the smell of burned meat and then saw the remnants of a fire, glowing feebly in a clearing. The scorched carcass of some animal lay among the embers.

He found Hathaway, Hawks and Ford, floating face-down in the lake.

Dead.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

There was enough light from the moon for him to be able examine the corpses and see the manner of their passing.

Hathaway had been taken, probably from behind, his throat slit deep from ear to ear, the gash black in the moonlight.

Hawks had a mighty bruise in the middle of his temple, as if he had been clubbed. His throat had also been slit.

Ford was the only one of the three men to show any sign of a struggle. There were several cuts across his hands and a slicing blow had removed part of his jaw. Like the other two he had been killed with an expert's knife across his neck.

John laid them out in the grass, looking down at the bodies, his face set like stone.

Monk had been ready.

Someone, perhaps the landlord from the village where they'd spent the night or maybe the blacksmith. Someone had betrayed their quest, and carried word to the Witchfinder.

'Another notch on the tally, Monk,' he said, eyes like dark gems in the mask of his face.

* * *

For nearly an hour John sat by the ashes of the fire, watching the red sparks shrink and fade. Until all that was left was cold greyness. The meat didn't tempt him. His mind was locked into what he should do next.

Monk had been ready. Had sent out his killers, probably the gipsy brothers, and had wiped out the three men as easily as crushing an insect beneath the heel of a boot. Now he would be back at his inn, sleeping sound and safe. He would know about Ferris, but would assume that he was elsewhere. And if he'd found the bodies, he was hardly likely to come after Monk on his own.

Was he?

'Yes,' said Ferris, nodding decisively. Now was the time. Even alone he might yet take them by surprise. Get in and kill Monk. Quick and silent. Not what he'd hoped for. But better . . . better than nothing at all. Rescue his dear Mary from the villains and away. Perhaps even save some of that two thousand guineas that had been stolen from his home.

Ferris checked his pistol and sword, making sure that Morgana was safely tethered. Setting off without a backward look at the trio of sodden corpses, walking sure-footed towards Cold Easter.

The inn was still and dark. Not a single light showing at any of the leaded windows. There were two large barns attached to the main building, and three or four more outbuildings. From one of the barns John caught the sound of a horse moving restlessly, stamping its feet and whinneying to itself.

Without the benefit of any scouting he had no way of knowing which of the rooms was occupied by Monk. And where the Mendoza brothers were. And, most important, where his darling Mary was.

His feet soundless on the dusty path through the rear garden, he picked his way nearer. Pausing by the first of the sheds. Catching the acrid, ammoniacal scent of a polecat. Probably where the innkeeper hutched his ferrets. The horse stamped again inside the second of the barns.

Quietly, a step at a time, he moved towards the back door of the inn. Praying that it would be open. As a precaution he drew the sabre.

The wind had finally driven all the clouds from the sky, leaving the hunter's moon to shine coldly down, sharpening every shadow.

He was level with the first barn. Barely twenty paces from the inn. From one of the rooms he heard the low voice of a man, and a woman's laugh. He froze, foot still raised, waiting for a light to show that he had been discovered. But there was no further sound and he moved on again.

Ten paces.

Five paces.

He could . . . 'Move and you're pig-meat, cully.'

Ferris stood very still, brain racing. Fighting against his own anger at being trapped like this. The lilting voice had a Romany ring to it and he was certain sure that it must be one of the brothers. Which meant that they were sleeping in the barn and not in the ale-house.

'Turn slow.'

He did as he was bid, finding himself only a few yards from a tall man. Curling hair and the glint of a

golden ring in his ear. Wearing a shirt and breeches, and holding a blunderbuss, its bell-mouth gaping large as a village well.

'Who be you, cully?' asked the man.

'A traveller, seeking shelter for the night.'

'It be three after midnight.'

'My horse threw a shoe and I have walked many miles. Who are you?'

'Not that it concerns you, but I am Benjamin Mendoza. And I'm about to pull this trigger and blast your lying head clean away from your fuckin' shoulders.'

'Why? I have done you no harm?'

Mendoza laughed quietly. 'You be Ferris. I know yon face. We seen you on Cambridge road. I don't forget a face, cully. We done for your mates. Now I do for you and get silver from Master Monk.'

'Would he rather not have me for trial? For putting to the question?' It was a desperate gamble.

The gipsy hesitated. 'Mayhap he would. Mayhap he would pay more. He and . . . Throw down that sword, Captain Ferris, if ye please.'

Ferris shifted his grip, holding the sabre near the top of the blade. Mendoza moved the muzzle of the flintlock to cover him. With a great lunge John threw the sword from him, to the side, so that it clattered on the cobbles of the yard, striking a shower of sparks.

Benjamin would not have been human if his eye hadn't followed the gleaming steel, attracted by the noise and light. By the time that his glance returned to his prisoner, Ferris had moved.

John dived forwards and sideways, hands hitting the dirt, levering with them. His feet kicking out at

Mendoza's legs. One heel catching him with enormous power on the knee-cap. The heel of the boot smashed the delicate joint, splintering the bottom of the femur, rupturing cartilage and displacing the patella. The tiny, crucial bone at the very centre of the knee.

The big gipsy toppled away sideways, dropping the gun, screaming in a thin, unnaturally high voice.

Ferris rolled to his feet, looking back at the crippled man. 'Mary and Joseph! Stay down,' he panted, seeing Mendoza struggling to rise. But his knee was dribbling apart and he couldn't make it. Waiting, crouched, face drawn tight in the moonlight. Like a stricken carnivore, even achieving a kind of brutal dignity.

As Ferris started to circle him the gipsy swivelled round, painfully, one hand clutching at his ruined knee. The other fumbling for the dagger that hung at his belt.

'Come on at me, you fucker! Come on, bugger your eyes! I'll cut your fuckin' eyes out. Come on!!'

The last gamble was inevitable, and doomed to a pathetic failure. Knowing that John Ferris need only to draw the pistol from his hip and put a ball through his head, Benjamin tried to throw the knife at him. But he was off balance, clumsy, and the blade hissed a yard past John's throat, burying itself in the wood of the shed behind him.

'You're dead, Mendoza. First you, then your evil master.'

There was the noise of voices from the barn, and he guessed that time was running out. And a light at the casement where he'd heard the man and woman. The pistol would have been too easy and impersonal. He wanted contact as the man died.

'Then I will save my Mary.'

There was something like surprise in the doomed man's eyes and his mouth opened. 'You call her . . .' he began.

'I do not have the time,' interrupted John.

Without giving the least warning he stepped quickly in and kicked out at the gypsy. His toe cathing Benjamin full under the base of his hooked nose. His head started to snap back from the violence of the impact, but the boot was still moving faster.

The gristle and bone near the top of Mendoza's nose was crushed first and the splinters were forced back deep between the eyes until some of them reached the frontal lobes of his brain. Before the curly hair at the back of his head cracked into the cobbles behind him, Benjamin Mendoza was dying.

The carnage to his central nervous system caused his body to thrash and jerk for some seconds, fingers and feet moving convulsively. The yard filled with the stink of dying and bladder and bowels opened uncontrollably. The breath still rasped in his throat and blood gouted from his smashed nose.

A darker thread inched from the corner of his open mouth.

'Ferris!' The voice was an animal shriek. Coming from the opened casement immediately above his head.

John turned and looked up, seeing the face of Robert Monk, glaring at him. There was a cocked pistol in the hand of the Witchfinder. In that frozen moment Ferris also saw the silhouette of a woman's head, in the room with Monk, but there was no

chance to identify her. It was probably Liza Hall or some local drab.

But John's only concern was for his life. The range was so close that he knew he had little chance, but he tried. Diving to his left, but his foot slipped in the pool of blood from Mendoza's mouth and he fell.

Saving his life.

The boom of the pistol and the cloud of powder smoke simultaneous with the crack of the lead ball gouging at the earth less than a foot from his head.

He crawled across and reached for his sword, hearing the barn door crashing back on his hinges and a yell of anger from one of the Mendoza brothers.

With all hope of surprise gone his only chance was to flee, and that was his course. Sprinting across the garden of the inn, vaulting a low hedge, and running as fast as he could, through the bushes and trees, across fields, to where Morgana was tethered. For some minutes he heard the noise of pursuit, and then that faded away and he knew that he was safe.

Two days later he was in Romney, circling the small town and approaching it from the east.

Only to find that there had been no need for his precautions.

Monk was gone.

Been and gone.

It took only the most casual inquiries. Any man on the streets would tell you about the arrival of the eminent Witchfinder with his company. Two hulking men, swarthy, like Spaniards or gipsies. A woman, into middle-age, smoking a pipe and look-

ing out of sorts with the world. She had opened up a baker's face with her whip when he attempted a casual jest.

'And a younger woman?'

But nobody had seen Mary. Though the wagon had been kept laced up, the canvas cover undisturbed. The local magistrate had assumed that Monk had come in reply to his letter and had sallied forth to meet him. Only to find that the Witchfinder had been and gone. Heading on to the coast.

John Ferris walked on the shingled beach, watching the sun sinking over the sullen water. There was a rain-storm out across the Channel, mist beneath the darkness, with the fiery orb dipping into the red-tinted waters below it.

The tiny pebbles crunched under his feet and his eyes were set over the rolling waves. Towards France. A local fisherman had taken them there the previous dawn.

'Three men and two women.'

That was all he'd noticed.

Except that two of the men seemed in a fine temper and were all for staying behind. The third man, the oldest of them, would have none of that and insisted on a speedy sailing. Neither of the women had made much impression on the boatman, though he'd seen that one was young and one not.

That was all.

'There will be time, Robert Monk,' swore John Ferris. 'You will return, and by Mary and Joseph I

shall await you here. Though it takes for ever and a day. Vengeance shall be mine, I swear it.'

The sun was nearly gone.

'I shall not suffer a witchfinder to live,' he whispered.

Finally, the light was quite gone and darkness covered the beach.

But John Ferris knew that one day there would again be light.

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The woman gave a throaty chuckle. Hands closed around Erin's throat and tightened. She clawed at the hands. Coloured dots swam in front of her eyes. I'm dying, she thought. The pressure slackened and she gasped for breath. Then she screamed as the whip cut across her raw back. It came down again and again. She tried to crawl away, but the whip cut across her thighs, her legs. She shrieked in agony . . .'

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